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# INFINITY RING



BOOK ONE

A MUTINY IN TIME  
JAMES DASHNER



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*A Mutiny in Time*

James Dashner

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Dad, who showed me the magic of science  
and the wonder of history

–J.D.







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## Prologue

DAK SMYTH sat on his favorite branch of his favorite tree, right next to his favorite friend, Sera Froste. *Not a bad way to spend a Saturday afternoon*, he thought.

Beyond the safety of the tree, there was plenty to worry about. The world was falling apart and the people in charge of things didn't seem to care. But Dak decided not to let little stuff like that bother him now.

Sera apparently agreed. "Feels good up here," she said. "Doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it sure does. Makes me kinda sad I wasn't born a monkey. Then I could live in one of these things."

Sera laughed. "You've got the personality of a monkey. And the smell. That's two-thirds of the way there, at least."

"Thanks," Dak said, as if she'd just paid him a tremendous compliment.

A soft breeze made the branches sway back and forth, just enough to soothe Dak into a partial trance. He and Sera climbed up the tree every so often when there was nothing else to do. It gave them a chance to talk, away from any distractions — distractions like adults, who complained constantly about taxes and crime rates and, in whispers, about the SQ. With all the mental static, it was a wonder Dak and Sera managed to get any thinking done. Fortunately, they were both geniuses . . . although in very different ways.

"You excited for the field trip this week?" Sera asked.

Dak looked over at her, slightly suspicious. Their class was going to a museum, full of history — which he loved — and not a whole lot of science

— which was her passion. But the question seemed genuine.

“Remember my last birthday?” he asked in return. “When I got that replica of Thomas Jefferson’s ascot?”

“How could I forget? You came screaming down the street like a girl who’d just found a bucket full of candy.”

Dak nodded, relishing the memory. “Well, I’m even more excited about this trip.”

“Gotcha. That’s pretty excited.”

They sat in silence for a while, Dak enjoying the breeze and the sounds of nature and the break from the rest of life. Gradually, though, he realized that Sera seemed far less relaxed. There was an unmistakable tension in her shoulders that had nothing to do with tree climbing. He followed her gaze across the yard to his front porch, where his parents had recently put up a new flag. The small flagpole affixed to the side of the house was usually used for seasonal displays — holiday flags in the winter, the forty-eight-starred U.S. flag in the long summer months.

Now, for the first time, Dak’s parents had put up a stark white flag with a black symbol in its center. That symbol was a circle broken by a curve and a thunderbolt — the insignia of the SQ.

“Don’t tell me your parents buy into all that,” Sera said, her voice solemn.

“I don’t think so. They said it’s easier this way. They’re less likely to be bothered if they just put up the flag.”

“The SQ — they make me sick,” Sera said. Dak had never heard such fierceness in her voice. “Someone has got to stand up to them eventually. Or someday it’s going to be too late.”

Dak listened to her as he stared out into the woods beyond his house. All that green, all those animals. There were parts of the world where these kinds of places had disappeared entirely. He’d read enough history to know that where the SQ went, trouble followed. He suddenly felt his own little burst of determination.

“Maybe it’ll be us who stand up,” he said. “You never know.”

“Yeah?” she answered absently.

“There’s an old saying,” Dak told her. “The times, they are a-changin’.”

“Ooh, I like that.”

“Maybe that’ll be our motto. Maybe we’ll change the times someday. Every problem has a solution, right? And our big brains have got to be good for something. What do you say?”

She looked over at him and stuck out her hand. He shook it hard. Somewhere nearby, a bird chirped excitedly.



## The Only Hope

BRINT TAKASHI stared at the monitor and tried to remember a time when he didn't know the world was about to end.

Mari Rivera, his second-in-command, sat next to him, and the way she was slowly shaking her head back and forth, she seemed to be the second most depressed person on the planet. Brint was the first.

"Well?" Mari asked. "What do you think?"

"What do I think? I think we have a global catastrophe on our hands," Brint replied. "Volcanic eruptions all along the Pacific Rim. Blizzards in parts of South America that have never even seen snow before. If we're lucky, the tropical storm brewing in the Atlantic might put out the wildfires in the Northeast."

"Look on the bright side," Mari said, her voice grim. "At least people believe we're in trouble now."

"People still believe what the SQ tells them to believe. Because fear is always more powerful than truth." He ran his fingers through his dark hair and sighed. "Aristotle would be so proud. Look what the Hystorians have been reduced to! The SQ is going to win — even if it means destroying the world."

It wasn't just the natural disasters that had him worried. Or the blackouts. Or the food shortages. There were also the Remnants. Every day when Brint went home and looked at the picture that hung above the fireplace — he and his wife sitting by a river, the sun glinting off the water



behind them — he felt a disorienting twist in his head and stomach. A gnawing gap in his mind that made him extremely uncomfortable. Someone — at least one someone — was *missing* from that photo. It made no sense whatsoever, but he knew in his bones that someone was missing.

He wasn't alone in suffering these types of sensations. More people experienced Remnants with each passing day. They'd strike when you least expected them. And they could drive you crazy. Literally crazy.

Time had gone wrong — this is what the Hystorians believed. And if things were beyond fixing now, there was only one hope left . . . to go back in time and fix the past instead.

Mari did what she always did when he was inclined to whine. She ignored him and moved on to the task at hand. "What's the latest on the Smyths?" she asked. Of all the scientists the Hystorians tracked, they were the only ones who hadn't been shut down by the SQ . . . yet.

Brint pulled up their file and pointed out the latest developments. All of the Smyths' experiments, findings, data — every little thing they did in their lab each and every day — it was all being monitored by the Hystorians. Without the Smyths' knowledge, of course. Brint would be sure to apologize for that *after* they saved the world.

They both fell silent for a minute, staring at the data on the screen as if hypnotized. The Smyths were so close. If only they could figure out the missing piece in their calculations. If only they could give the Hystorians a fighting chance at carrying out Aristotle's two-thousand-year-old plan to save the world.

"It's coming, you know," Mari whispered. "Sooner than I ever thought."

Brint nodded as dread squeezed his heart. "I never would've guessed it would be in our lifetime."

Mari continued, her words like a prophecy of doom from a wrinkled old oracle.

"It's coming, all right. The Cataclysm is coming, and we'll all wish we were dead long before it kills us."



## Old Man in a Coffin

DAK SMYTH was a nerd.

He'd been called worse, no doubt. Dork, geek, wimp, brainiac, pencil-pusher, dweeb, you name it. But the word that most often floated out of people's mouths when they mentioned him was *nerd*. And did he mind? No. When all those dummies who poked fun were working their tails off in thirty years, living paycheck to paycheck to buy doughnuts and milk, he'd be laughing it up in his private jet, drinking cream soda till he puked. Then he'd laugh again as his butler cleaned it up, and when that was done, he'd count all his money and eat big blocks of cheese.

(Dak Smyth was a nerd who also loved cheese. Unnaturally so. Not a winning combination, which he was the first to admit.)

On the day before the big school field trip to the Smithsonian Museum in the nation's capital of Philadelphia, Dak had to put aside his nerd-powered excitement to attend the most boring of events — an uncle's funeral. Make that great-uncle, as in Great-Uncle Frankie, a man he'd laid eyes on all of twice if you included the viewing before the funeral, which Dak certainly did. He'd looked down on an old, grizzled man who had his eyes closed, hands crossed over his chest, looking like he'd just settled

down for one of the twenty naps a day the geezer was probably used to. But, according to Dak's mom — and supported by the fact that the man was lying inside a coffin — Great-Uncle Frankie was dead as a doornail.

The funeral service had been slightly boring and lasted roughly one hundred and thirty hours, but now they were finally at the family dinner that came afterward. Dozens of people who'd been boo-hooing their eyeballs out an hour earlier were laughing like overcaffeinated hyenas, stuffing their faces with a whole week's worth of SQ-rationed food. Dak wondered whether funerals for old people always ended up being such festive affairs.

He sat at a table with a bunch of cousins, none of whom he'd ever met. They were talking about all kinds of things that he didn't care about. Like that lame show where they crown the next SQ intern. Or game five of some sports championship that was so dull Dak didn't even know which teams were playing (or what sport it was). Then some kid with a pimple the size of President McClellan's face on Mount Rushmore started talking excitedly about the latest fashion trends, namely those jeans with the pockets that made your rear end look like it was upside down. *Seriously?* Dak thought. These people couldn't possibly share the same genetics with him, could they?

Just as he decided he couldn't take any more, a sudden feeling came over him — a familiar itch that he'd learned long ago was impossible to ignore.

He *had* to share his tremendous knowledge of history, and he had to do it *now*.

Dak stood up and cleared his throat. When no one paid him any attention, he picked up his glass and tapped it loudly with his spoon until everyone in the room finally shut their yappers and looked at him.

"I just have something I'd like to say to everybody," he announced. He heard a few groans in response, but he assumed those were the old fogies, feeling aches and pains as they shifted in their seats. A quick glance at his mom showed that she'd put her head in her hands, and his dad was looking at him wide-eyed, slowly shaking his head back and forth. There was something like panic on his face.

Dak hurried to continue before somebody forced him to stop. "I know we're gathered here for a very solemn occasion. Poor Great-Uncle Frankie has gone the way of the dodo bird, soon to rot in peace. Um, I mean, rest in

peace. But, um, I wanted to share something to help you all realize that things aren't as bad as they seem."

He paused to gauge people's reactions. They all seemed enraptured.

"You see," he continued, "our dear relative could've gone out the same way as Rasputin, the grand Russian mystic, in the year 1916. That poor man was poisoned, shot four times, clubbed over the head, then drowned in a river. Drowned in a river, for crying out loud! After being poisoned, shot, and clubbed! Poor fella." Dak let out a little chuckle to set the right mood. "So, as you can clearly see, Great-Uncle Frankie got off pretty easy when all is said and done."

Dak finished by pulling in a long, satisfied breath. He looked around the room and saw nothing but blank faces staring back at him. Lots of blinking.

"Thanks for listening," he finally said. Then he held up his water glass and yelled, "Cheers!"

His mom fell out of her chair.



The next day brought the field trip he'd been looking forward to for months. For someone who loved history as much as Dak did, going to the Smithsonian was better than getting locked in a candy factory overnight. He planned to gorge himself on information.

On the bus ride there, he sat by his best friend in the whole wide world. Her name was Sera Froste, and so far no one had given them any flack about being such good friends. Well, except for the occasional "when're you gonna get married" jokes. And the "Dak and Sera, sittin' in a tree" songs.

Okay, so they'd received plenty of flack.

"What exhibits are we going to see before lunch?" Dak asked her after he'd gone over the museum's floor plan with fluorescent highlighters. "And which ones after?"

Sera looked up from the electronic book that she was reading on her Square tablet, fixing him with the sort of stare she usually reserved for a bug in a jar. Her long dark hair made her expression look even more severe, as if it were on display in a picture frame. "Would you relax? Let's just play it by ear, roam around. I don't know, actually *enjoy* ourselves."

Dak's mouth dropped open. "Are you *insane*?" And he really meant it — she obviously didn't comprehend the opportunity they were about to be given. "We need to plan this to the second — I'm not taking any chance of missing something cool."

"Oh, for the love of mincemeat," was her only response before she returned her attention to *String Theory and Other Quantum Leaps in Quantum Physics*.

Sera was a nerd in her own right, almost nerdy enough in stature to compete with Dak himself. *Oh, who am I kidding?* Dak thought. She had him beat by a mile.

This was the girl who had recently convinced him to attend a Saturday afternoon thesis reading at the local university — "convinced" him by threatening to scream out in the middle of lunch that she was in love with him if he said no. Dak had fiercely protested because he'd wanted to see the guy at the state fair who swore he was so old that he'd been Mussolini's foot doctor during World War Two. (The man evidently had toenail clippings to prove it.) But Sera *swore* that it'd be more exciting to hear a three-hour presentation called "The Effect of Tachyon Generation on Ambient Wellsian Radiation."

It wasn't.

Sera had finally agreed to leave the presentation early, but only because the speaker kept using the words *baryon* and *meson* interchangeably when, according to Sera, everyone knows that's not proper.

Suddenly Dak had an idea. He ran his fingers through his sandy blond hair and stared intently at his color-coded floor plan. "I guess we can skip the Hope Diamond exhibit if we're short on time. It's supposed to be cursed, which is cool. I'm not sure what it means by 'an exploration of the biogeochemical processes that give minerals their unique properties,' though. It sounds like a total snooze fest if you ask me."

"Who asked you?" said Sera, putting her SQuare down. "Let me see that map."

By the time Dak and Sera marched off the bus, Dak's heart was giddy with excitement.

They had two hours and forty-seven minutes before the earthquake that would almost kill them.



## Halls of Boring Wonder

POOR DAK, Sera thought as she and her classmates filed through the entrance to the Smithsonian. Her best friend was always annoying people with his ill-timed speeches on useless historical facts. And his obsession with cheese was just . . . well, weird.

Last year in fourth grade he'd written an entire poem about types of cheeses and how each one of them was like a family member to him. Mrs. E'Brien had finally relented and let him recite it to the class in exchange for his promise to spare them any spontaneous sermons about people who were dead. He'd proudly done his performance, but then only made it a day and a half before he suddenly blurted out a five-minute information dump about the guy who invented the stepladder.

So yeah, Dak was quaint and unique and a little bit annoying in his own quaint, unique way. But none of these qualities were what made Sera think *Poor Dak* that morning. What worried her was how clueless he seemed to be about the true state of the world. The SQ. The natural disasters. The ever-increasing crime rates.

The Remnants.

That last thought made her pause, a deep ache pressing against her heart. . . .

And then the stinky kid named Roberk bumped into her from behind.

She knew it was him because an untimely draft pushed the boy's patented smell across her body like rotten air escaping from a newly unsealed tomb. The odor itself was a one-of-a-kind mixture of fried liver and boiled cabbage — it definitely put her in mind of hydrogen sulfide. "Geez, Sera," he said. "If you want a hug, just ask for it."

Sera wanted to tell him all about hydrogen sulfide, about how it was usually produced by swamps and sewage, which basically made Roberk a walking sewer — but it was hard to say anything while holding her breath. So she just gave him the biggest eye roll she could muster, then continued walking. She caught up to Dak in the atrium of the building, where the exhibits began on the other side of a huge open archway. Dak was craning his neck so much she thought he might strain a muscle. He was obviously dying to see what awaited them in the museum.

"Don't hurt yourself, there," she leaned over and said to him, determined to slam a door on the sour mood that had crept up on her when she'd thought of the Remnants. "You'll miss the whole tour if they have to take you away for emergency neck replacement."

"Whoa!" he whispered back fiercely. "I think that's a Viking longship in the next room! Must be a new exhibit. Do you think it's a karvi or a busse?"

Sera got on her tiptoes to look — through the archway she could see the ornate carved dragon head at the bow of what had to be a massive wooden ship. "Cool." She would've said more, but Mr. Davedson had just cleared his throat to get the class's attention. Their teacher was an odd duck — the word *crooked* described his features the best. Hair, eyebrows, mustache, ears, tie, pants. Everything about him seemed to lean to the left.

"Okay, kids, listen up!" He always called them kids, and she'd been tempted for months to respond, "Yes, Grandpa?" But she hadn't gotten up the nerve quite yet.

"We've got an awful lot of things to see today, and not much time to do it. Remember not to question the docent when he speaks — he's a representative of our beloved SQ." He shot a nervous look at a tall, smartly dressed bald man standing by the door. Sera had seen him when she'd come in, but she hadn't noticed the silver SQ insignia he wore on the lapel of his

suit. “I expect everyone to be on their best behavior — in tip-top shape and proudly representing the fine institution of Benedict Arnold Middle School! Can I have a woo-hoo?”

*Oh, please,* Sera thought in a panic. Not this — not in front of the museum staff!

When no one responded, Mr. Davedson cupped his hand behind his ear. “I can’t heaaaaaar you. Can I have a woo-hoo?”

The class halfheartedly gave him his lame cheer, and he shook his head sadly. “Well, I would’ve thought we’d be just a little bit more excited to come here during such dark times. The SQ has graciously released funds to ensure the continued operations of this museum, and we should all be grateful!” He shot a second nervous glance at the docent.

That was another thing that made Sera want to scream. Not only had she gotten the biggest goon at the school as her teacher, but he always said stuff like that about the SQ. It was ridiculous to her that they should thank the SQ for not closing down a public building. As if anything they did could make up for the way they bullied the governments of the world. Not that she should expect her teacher to grow a backbone when even the President of the United States was eating out of the SQ’s hand.

“Good ole Mr. Davedson,” Dak whispered to her. “Can’t say a bad word about anyone. You gotta love that guy.”

Sera smiled despite herself. Dak was oblivious, but somehow he always saw the positive in other people. Even if it did annoy her sometimes, it was a trait she wished she had.

The museum docent, stiff and gruff and chrome-domed, finally took over command, paying further lip service to the SQ for “visionary leadership in trying times.” Sera managed to suppress her eye roll until the docent had turned to escort the fidgety group through the huge archway and into the Age of Exploration exhibit hall. The longship Dak had spotted now loomed above Sera like a hovering spaceship, suspended by almost invisible wires. Naturally, the group stopped walking right when she stood in its shadow. One little snap of a wire and she’d be crushed, her head ending up right next to her toes.

The room was filled with other replica boats, an early compass, a detailed diagram showing the difference between Viking and Egyptian vessels, and (of course) dust. Lots of dust. As the docent started droning on



about this and that and who said what about who did that, she had the sudden realization that this could end up being the longest day of her life. She ached for the cool halls and auditorium of the local university. There was science and technology on display here, but it was hardly cutting edge.

On the other hand, Dak stared with fascination at the SQ puppet preaching his boring knowledge. He couldn't have been more riveted if a corpse had just dug its way out of a grave and started dancing. Half to annoy him, Sera nudged him with an elbow.

"So much for your step-by-step agenda," she said under her breath. "Looks like we're stuck with a babysitter."

Without looking at her, he whispered, "Yeah, this is some fascinating stuff. I can hardly believe I'm here to see it with my own eyes."

Sera realized it would be pointless to even try talking to Dak until lunch.

They moved on from there to other rooms and halls, learning about everything from dinosaurs to the SQ's influence on the space race. Sera tried to question something the docent said at one point, but her teacher hushed her immediately, once again looking around nervously.

*Ugh*, Sera thought. She swore to quit listening altogether.

Every once in a while, Dak would tear his gaze away from the docent and look at her with wide eyes. Then he'd say something like, "Isn't that cool?" or "Can you *believe* that?" or "Man, those Mongols had a sense of humor." She'd simply nod and hope he didn't force her to admit she hadn't heard a word that had been said.

Eventually they circled back and found themselves in the Exploration hall again, where they stood for what seemed like hours before an exhibit dedicated to the discovery of the Americas by the famous Amancio brothers. Everybody knew the story, though the docent left out the best part — the grisly fate of the cruel man that the heroically mutinous brothers had disposed of, Christopher Columbus. In fact, Sera had only ever heard of Columbus because Dak liked to tell the story. The man's name never came up in class or during Amancio Day celebrations.

The docent was just going off about how important the SQ had been in shaping the history of the world for the better when Dak cleared his throat loudly and raised his hand. *Oh, no*, Sera thought. *Here we go.*

“Excuse me!” Dak practically shouted when neither of the adults acknowledged him. “Excuse me! I have something important to say!”

Both men looked sharply at him.

“What is it?” Mr. Davedson asked. Sera knew that expression and that tone. The man had seen this happen far too many times — and he knew that indulging Dak at the museum could spell disaster.

“Well, I think you’ve *clearly* forgotten to say something important about the compass and its history.” He let out a chuckle and glanced around the room as if all the students would be nodding their heads vigorously in agreement. When no one did, he frowned. “You know. How the fourth-century writings of Wang Xu in China were instrumental — pardon the pun — to the eventual discovery of magnetism and the directional iron needle. Heh heh. Hard to believe there was ever a world where people didn’t know about *that!*”

The room had fallen tomb silent. Tomb-buried-under-three-miles-of-bedrock-under-the-ocean silent.

Someone sniffled.

Dak chuckled again. “Oh, man. Crazy stuff.” He shot an embarrassed look at Sera then looked down at the floor, his face awash in red.

And those were the moments Sera realized exactly why they were such good friends. They were both inhumanly dorky. No judgments. She reached out and punched him lightly on the arm.

“Ow,” he said. But he smiled, and the red in his cheeks started to fade.

“All righty then,” Mr. Davedson barked, clapping his hands once. “That wasn’t so bad. Let’s all gather —”

A sudden burst of violent movement cut him off. The entire building started to shake, along with everything inside of it, display cases shuddering as the great hallway seemed to bounce and tilt and wobble. Screams erupted from every direction at once. Sera planted her feet and fought to keep her balance while most of her classmates fell on top of one another. Dak was one of them, tangled up in a sea of arms and legs.

As if anyone needed to hear it, Mr. Davedson screeched one word at the top of his lungs:

“Eeeeeeeearthquaaaaaaake!”



## Cracks and Snaps

DAK KNEW very well that time made no sense during natural disasters — he'd been through a dozen or so over the course of his life. But as the terrible shaking of the world around him stretched on and on, he could have sworn that each second lasted a full minute. Terror filled his every muscle, bone, and nerve.

He currently had a foot in his mouth, and he was pretty sure it was Makiko's, her toe somehow squirming its way between his lips as a whole group of people tried to wrestle free of one another on the floor. He swatted her leg away just as someone's armpit replaced it, smashing against his nose. The ground beneath them felt like a nightmarish seesaw, pitching back and forth as the groans and squeals of bending wood and metal filled the air.

A hand suddenly slapped his back and squeezed the material of his shirt into a fist. Then he was yanked up to his feet. He spun around to see Sera staring at him with fear in her eyes. Somehow she'd turned into Marvelman when the quake started.

They stumbled away from the mass of kids on the floor to an open area that wasn't beneath any hanging displays, then helped each other maintain

their balance as they staggered two or three steps one way then back the other. He saw an ancient Mayan figurine suddenly roll across the floor from another room, just in time to get stepped on and smashed by Roberk. Dak's heart broke a little, but a fresh jolt that threw him several inches off the floor brought him back to reality — he had to hope *people* didn't get smashed like that, too.

"It'll be over soon!" he yelled at Sera.

"If we don't die first!" she called back.

"Well, it'll end whether we die or not!"

"Thanks. I didn't know!"

A sudden *crack* rang out, a splinter of thunder that made the hair on the back of Dak's neck stand up. The sound had come from directly beneath them. He stared in horror as the ground split open before his eyes, a gap slicing across the floor like a zigzagging snake. Chunks of tile tore free and plummeted into a dark basement far below. Dak grabbed Sera by the arm and they jumped to safety, then watched as their classmates scrambled to get clear.

Two of their friends didn't quite make it. They dangled over the abyss, holding on for dear life. Mr. Davedson and the docent were sprawled out on the other side of the room and seemed to have no intention of helping the endangered kids.

"Get them!" Sera yelled, already moving.

Dak followed her as best he could — the building continued to tremble and shake, making it impossible to walk. They dropped to their knees and crawled forward to Makiko, who gripped a jagged outcropping of tiled floor. Her eyes caught Dak's, pleading for him to save her.

"I've got her!" he yelled at Sera. "Go help Fraderick!"

As Sera crawled away, Dak was left hoping he hadn't spoken too soon. If the building pitched at the wrong moment, he could slide right past Makiko and into the abyss below — probably taking her with him. He lay on his stomach to get as much stability as he could. Then he reached out and grabbed both of her arms.

He pulled, trying to bend his elbows and lift her out of the hole. She hadn't seemed very big whenever he'd looked at her before, but now she felt as if she weighed as much as Fat Bobby — that dude who sat in front of the Laundromat doing absolutely nothing on Saturdays. Dak screamed with

the effort, throwing all of his strength into it. Makiko seemed to realize it wasn't working and started to climb him like a ladder, using his armpits and belt as rungs and the back of his neck as a foothold. He gurgled in pain as she lurched up and over the edge then toppled off of his body.

"Thanks, Dak," she said, facing him. "You're my hero." Then she giggled.

Dak could only stare at her. That was one messed-up girl.

He saw that Sera had gotten Fraderick pulled up safely as well, and everyone scooted as far away from the gap as possible. The building continued to shake, creaking and groaning all the while. But the hole in the floor had stopped growing. No one was screaming anymore.

*We're going to make it*, Dak thought.

Then something snapped, like a loosed rubber band cracking through the air. Then again. Then again.

"Up there!" someone yelled.

Dak looked toward the ceiling and saw that the thin wires holding the Viking ship upright were breaking free from the walls, whipping out to smack into the wooden craft. Its port side abruptly tilted downward several feet, sending a spray of broken drywall snowing down on top of the crowd. Shouts and screams again filled the air as everyone half-staggered, half-crawled out of harm's way.

He rejoined Sera as they moved toward the far wall. They were still a dozen feet away from safety when the floor lurched upward several feet then slammed back down again, as if the whole building had been picked up and dropped. Sera sprawled onto the floor as more *snaps* and *cracks* whipped through the air — this time followed by a terrible, creaking groan. The ship had torn loose and was tilting away from its perch, falling toward the ground as its final supports broke free.

Dak could see where it was headed and wasted no time thinking. He grabbed Sera by the hands and yanked her across the floor so hard that she slid ten feet and slammed into the wall. Then he dove after her. He didn't have to look because he heard it well enough — the ship crashed into the ground right where he and his best friend had just been.

And as if that had been nature's exclamation point on the whole affair, the earthquake ceased a few seconds later, everything almost instantly growing still. Dak twisted around to sit with his back against the wall, right

next to Sera, who was pulling in heavy breaths, just as he was. They both stared at the smashed ancient longboat, now nothing but a pile of firewood with a carved dragon's head sticking out at the top. Dak felt as if he'd just watched history itself being shattered.

"That was close," Sera whispered.

"Yeah," Dak agreed. "Good thing you have someone watching out for you. I'll take your thank-you payment in cash, credit, or fine cheeses. Your choice. I just wish I could've done something about that poor boat."

Sera shoved him gently. "If it was a choice between me or the boat, I'm okay with how it turned out."

Mr. Davedson was the first one to stand up, and he walked around the broken ship toward the large crack in the floor, brushing dust and debris off of his shirt and pants. He reached the edge and looked down, then turned to face the students crowded up against the wall.

"I can't believe it," their teacher said in a dazed whisper. "I just can't believe it."

"What?" Dak asked.

Mr. Davedson shook his head slowly back and forth. "Seven earthquakes this month. And now they're happening *here*."

No one responded, and his words hung there for a moment.

"The SQ has everything under control," the dust-covered docent insisted harshly.

Dak and Sera exchanged a quick glance. They'd never admit it aloud, but they couldn't quite believe him.



## False Memory

THREE DAYS later, Sera suffered one of the worst Remnants of her life.

Her uncle Diego was out running errands, so Sera was home alone when she had an overpowering disturbance inside her head. An uncomfortable itch that made her stop and rub her temples, as if she hoped to dig deep down enough to massage it out. She couldn't explain it — she never could — but she knew with absolute certainty that she needed to go outside, to the backyard and fields behind her home, and walk to the old barn that was half a mile down the old dirt lane.

The sun shone in a sky without any clouds, but a grainy haze darkened the light to an orange glow, surreal and otherworldly. The haze came from forest fires in rural Pennsylvania, their fog of smoke drifting toward the sea on a light breeze like a noxious storm. Sera ran along the lane, enjoying the warmth despite the weirdness that had settled inside her, that pull to run to the barn for the umpteenth time in her life.

So she ran harder.

Dust billowed up from her footsteps and stuck to the sweat that had broken out on her legs. The dry heat nearly sucked her breath away. As she made her way down the lane, she thought of the earthquake at the museum

and the SQ officials who'd insisted it was no big deal and all the other things that seemed to be wrong with the world. She also thought of Dak, her BFF Forever (which was redundant, but she still liked to say it that way) and how something deep inside her felt that there was a reason for their friendship. That something great waited on the horizon of their lives.

She reached the little grassy meadow that circled the barn, and stopped in the same spot she always did. A single granite boulder had stood there longer than anyone could remember — it probably went all the way back to the Precambrian age. It would probably outlast people. Leaning against it, Sera stared at the barn's warped wooden slats and the faded red paint that flaked away a little more with each passing year. And then she waited.

She waited for the Remnant.

There was a part of her — a rational side — that knew she didn't have to do this. That she could choose to ignore the craving to come here, could go do something else, avoiding the pain that was about to envelop her. But in some ways she welcomed the pain. Did she understand it? No. Did she enjoy it? No. But she welcomed and relished it because she knew it had something to do with a life that should've been. She knew it like she knew her hands were connected to her arms. And she couldn't pass up the only opportunities she'd ever have to experience it. Not even if it hurt.

And so, she kept waiting.

It began just a few minutes later.

There was a rushing behind her ears, within her head — a pressure that wasn't audible but was there all the same. An ache pierced her heart, a sadness that opened like a gate within her, a gaping maw of darkness that wanted to suck the life out of her and pull it down to the depths. She stared at the double barn doors, and even though they didn't budge, every part of her yearned for them to do so. She could almost see it, could almost feel the breeze that would stir as they swung open and slammed against the side of the barn.

Nothing happened, of course. But something should have. Those doors should have opened and two people should have walked through, calling her name with smiles on their faces.

Sera didn't understand it. She didn't understand it in the slightest.

But she knew. Those two people were her parents.

She'd never met them, and she never would.





## An Iron Door

THE FIRST thing Sera wanted to do when the Remnant faded was go tell Dak about it. She always did. He himself had never experienced a major one — nothing that couldn't be explained away as déjà vu or a simple forgotten memory — so he didn't totally understand. But he tried to, and for her that was good enough. Plus, his parents were out of town for the weekend, so she knew he could use the company. Usually his grandma came over when his parents were gone, but she was older than most trees and spoke about as often as one.

Dak was in a lawn chair when she arrived, sitting under the branches of an apple tree as he read from a gigantic book. Normal people used their SQuare for such a thing, but not Dak. He'd search every library in town until he found the printed version of what he wanted, no matter how old it was or how battered.

“What're you reading?” she asked him.

He didn't answer, his nose buried in the pages and his eyes' focused stare moving across and down, across and down. This was classic Dak. She waited a few seconds to be polite, then kicked him in the shin.

“Ow!” he yelled. The book slipped out of his hands and tumbled off the chair to land in a heap of brown leather and torn paper. The book was so old it had completely fallen apart.

“Oops!” Sera said. “Sorry. That’s why you should do your reading on a Square.”

“Yeah, because it’d be way better to drop an expensive computer. Mrs. Pierce is gonna kill me!”

An empty chair stood on the other side of the tree, and Sera dragged it over to sit and help collect the destroyed book’s remains. “What was this anyway?” she asked, turning over the yellowed pages to get a look.

“It’s called — it was called — *The Rise and Fall and Rise of the Roman Empire*. I don’t need to tell you how fascinating —”

Sera held up a hand to cut him off. “Yeah, you’re right, you don’t need to tell me. I can only imagine the magic you felt as you tore through its riveting pages.”

“Quit being a smart aleck,” he said with eyes narrowed. “It was riveting. Only you could think making guesses about junk that’s smaller than an atom is more exciting than reading about evil emperors cutting people up and bathing in their blood.”

She stared at him, blinking once in exaggerated disinterest.

“Hungry?” he asked with a sly grin.

She tried to grin back but nothing came. “I had another one today,” she said.

“A moon-sized pimple?” he asked.

She punched him in the arm. “A Remnant, you jerk.”

His face fell a bit. “Oh. Sorry. I know those are hard on you.”

“Sometimes I think they’re getting worse. It’s so hard to explain. But it hurts like nothing else.”

“Weird.”

Sera had been called weird before, and not always nicely. But she knew Dak meant it in a completely different way. And he was right. “Yeah, it is weird.”

Dak gave up on the pile of paper and leather and shoved it all under the chair. Then he stood up. “I’ve got something that’ll cheer you to pieces in a heartbeat.”

“You do, huh?”

“I do.” He pulled something out of his pocket. “My mom and dad left the keys to the lab out.”

Sera had never heard such beautiful words in all her life. She didn’t even bother responding — she was already on her feet and sprinting toward the back of the house.



The lab was a separate building in the back corner of the Smyths’ property — a three-story brick structure with no windows and a single door made of black iron and sealed shut with about 197 locks by the look of it. When Dak had said that his parents left the keys out, he’d skipped the mundane details — that the keys were *usually* in a sealed box that was kept in a fireproof safe within a huge wall-sized gun locker. Sera thought it was all a little OCD — but Dak’s parents had always been a bit odd.

Sera got there first, waiting impatiently in front of the imposing door as Dak approached, jangling the keys in his hand. “It looks like something out of the Dark Ages, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“How in the world did they forget to put the keys away?” Sera asked. “I’d expect them to catch their flight to Europe completely naked before letting something like that happen.” Dak’s parents went overseas at least once a month for some kind of business venture that no one had ever fully explained to Sera. It was how they made money to support their *real* passion — the oddball experiments and silly research projects rumored to be taking place inside the lab. Sera couldn’t wait to check them out.

“Let’s just say I helped them along a little,” Dak answered. “I’ve been dying to see what they’ve been up to in here. Dad keeps saying they’ve come up with something really big. Really, really big. Maybe they finally came up with a working model of that regurgitating refrigerator he’s always talked about.”

Sera summed it up in a deadpan voice: “And so you stole their keys so that you can explore their inner sanctum completely against their will.”

“I won’t break anything if you don’t.”

“Pinkie swear?”

“Pinkie swear.”

They hooked their little fingers and that was that. Dak's grandma was half blind and three-quarters deaf, so she'd never know they were up to something.

Dak flipped through the keys and started matching big ones and little ones with a series of locks that lined the right side of the door. Sera looked on as he worked, trying to hide the impatience that threatened to explode out of her. Here she had the chance of a lifetime to peruse a fully functioning science lab — no matter how silly the things that might be going on within.

Dak was on his knees now, trying to find the key to fit a lock that was only an inch above the ground.

"Is it your goal in life to drive me crazy?" Sera asked. "One more minute passes and I'm going to start ninja chopping your skinny head."

"You're awfully loud for a ninja," he said just as something clicked. "Got it!" The heavy door swung inward with a metallic scrape across the cement floor. Sera slipped past him and went inside before he could even stand up.

"Hurry and close it," she whispered to him, as if someone were listening in. She couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. The thought chilled her spine as Dak slammed the door closed.

There was a bank of switches to her right and she flipped them all, then watched in anticipation as lights flickered on one at a time, revealing the beauty of the lab in slow motion. It was huge, filled with everything she'd ever imagined would be in such a place — computers running along the walls, monitors atop every desk, and a jumble of electronics and chemicals and glassware on every available surface. Freestanding whiteboards were covered with a rainbow scrawl of mathematical and chemical formulas. The whole humongous room was a haven of science. It was far beyond what she'd expected from the Smyths.

Something to the left caught Sera's attention. She walked over to see a glass case, about the size and shape of a small refrigerator. Behind the glass, on a felt stand, there was a silvery band of metal an inch thick, shaped like a figure eight and about a foot long. Except for a small touch screen on one side, the object appeared completely smooth and shiny, almost shimmering like liquid. It looked alien — and very advanced.

“That must be it,” Dak whispered. She didn’t know when he’d appeared at her shoulder. “Their really, really big project. What in the world is it?”

There was a small label affixed to the glass case, three words that made Sera’s heart skip a few beats.

*The Infinity Ring.*

Sera shifted her gaze to the right. Next to the display case, a whiteboard stood over a large desk on which several SQuares rested. Three more words were written across the top of the board — *The Missing Piece* — and a series of formulas had been laid out below them. Sera scanned the scrawl of letters and numbers and symbols, her fascination growing, and something tickled in her brain again. This time, she knew, it had nothing to do with a Remnant.

“Dak?” she said.

“Yeah?” He’d already wandered off.

“I’m going to need some time to myself. Your parents left behind quite a puzzle.” She turned her head to look at him. “I want to know exactly what this is.”



## Hitting the SQuares

AFTER AN hour of wandering his parents' lab, Dak had had enough. Sera hadn't moved from the desk next to the Infinity Ring — whatever *that* meant — where she pored over his parents' notes and formulas. Dak wanted no part of that, figuring she'd find out some cool stuff then tell him about it later in terms he could understand. So he fiddled around, peeking at diagrams and models of things he couldn't name, jars full of gross stuff he couldn't identify, and books that seemed interesting at first glance but proved to be incomprehensible.

Sera didn't speak the entire time. Every once in a while a grunt or an "Ah!" would escape her, but nothing else. She was onto something, and when that happened, Dak knew he might as well leave her to it.

"Hey," he said to her. "I'm going to fix something to eat. Want anything?"

She didn't respond, didn't even look back at him. Instead she moved from one SQuare to another, flicking on its glowing display and leaning closer to read.

"Hey," he said again. "I'm gonna go down to Mrs. Jackson's place and murder her whole family. Then I'm gonna fly to the moon and eat some

chickens. Be right back.”

“Okay,” she murmured.

*Man, is she onto something,* he thought as he went out the door.



Several hours later, stuffing his face with potato chips, Dak still hadn't heard or seen from Sera. He was sitting on the couch flipping the TV back and forth between a fluff piece about the upcoming French royal wedding and news reports about twin hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico, both category fives and too unpredictable to project where they might make landfall. Such things had grown almost tiresome to track, but there wasn't anything else to do.

He knew Sera would work until she died of starvation if left to her own devices, so he whipped up a couple of ham sandwiches and took them out to her. She accepted the plate without so much as a thank-you and started wolfing the food down, her eyes still on the Square in front of her.

“The moon was awesome,” Dak said. “The chickens, too.”

“Uh-huh,” Sera said under her breath.

Hating what a waste the day had become, Dak slouched back to the house, wondering why he'd ever thought it a good idea to let Sera loose in such a place.



The shrill ring of the phone woke him up.

With groggy eyes, his mouth feeling like someone had stuffed a dirty sock in there, he looked over at the clock. In a panic, he shot to his feet. It was almost ten p.m.

Shrieking curses at no one in particular, he ran to the phone and answered it. Just as he expected, Sera's uncle was ranting and raving on the other end, wondering where she was — it was nearly curfew, and officers could pop in for a random check any minute. Dak apologized profusely, saying he'd get her right away. He thought Sera knew better than to risk being out past ten. Plus, her uncle had a really annoying nasally voice when he was ticked off.

“Sera!” Dak yelled when he burst through the iron door — as much as he *could* burst through it when the thing weighed more than the limestone blocks used to construct the Great Pyramid of Giza. “Do you have any clue what time it is? Your uncle’s having a hissy fit! He says he won’t cover for you if the SQ come around asking why you’re out past curfew.”

She didn’t panic like he thought she would. Instead, she slowly stood up and turned to him. Somehow her face looked both exhausted and full of energy.

Dak almost wanted to take a step back. “Um . . . you okay, there?”

“The Infinity Ring is a time-travel device,” she said, as calm as he’d ever seen her. “And I figured out the missing piece. I know how to make it work.”





## The Missing Piece

TIME TRAVEL. Dak didn't know which was cooler: The idea that such a thing was possible, or the fact that his parents might have been the ones to figure it out. Although he didn't know if he quite believed it, he couldn't help being excited at the very idea.

He spent almost every minute of Sunday with Sera, and he only understood about twenty percent of what came out of her mouth. She was working in the lab, reprogramming the Infinity Ring as he sat and watched. Making it even more annoying, she started half of her sentences with phrases like, "It's really simple if you think about it" or "Obviously" or "As you well know . . ."

And the *words* she used! "Space-time" and "relativity" and "cosmic strings" and "tachyons" and "quantum this" and "quantum that." Dak had a splintering headache by noon and no amount of medicine would make it go away.

Adding insult to injury, Dak was anxious that Sera's uncle might be knocking on their door at any second. It turned out the authorities *had* stopped in for a random check at Sera's house the night before, and they'd written her up for the violation. She'd been scolded by her terrified uncle

and grounded, but that didn't stop *her*. No siree. She promised to stay in her room all day and read but instead she climbed out the window and ran to Dak's house before he'd even had a chance to take advantage of his parents' absence to eat a plate of cheese for breakfast.

And that still wasn't the worst of it. Dak was all too aware he'd broken more of his mom and dad's rules in one weekend than he had his entire life before that. And somehow he'd let Sera talk him into the ultimate sin against them.

She'd taken their most prized possession — ranking just slightly above Dak, no doubt — out of its protective glass case and had been playing with it for hours. She was messing around with a thing that probably had cost every spare penny they'd ever earned and could end up being the most valuable invention of all time. He winced every time she took a screwdriver to it. He nearly fainted when she used the soldering iron. He'd either believed her speeches about what she could do or he was the single stupidest person who'd ever lived. Either way, if this didn't work, he was going to be grounded for the next three thousand years.

It was just past five o'clock, all of these thoughts going through Dak's head on loop, when Sera put the device down on the desk and said one word:

“Done.”

Dak blinked a few times. “What do you mean, *done*? That's the simplest word you've said all day, but it can't possibly mean what I think it means.”

“I'm done, Dak.” She pointed at the Ring. “That little thing right there will warp space-time and take a person into the past. I'm not sure why I should make it any more complicated than that.”

Dak was finding her conclusion absolutely impossible to believe. He walked over and picked up the device. It was heavier than it looked, and cold to the touch. For the first time, Dak noticed a pencil-thin window that ran along the device's entire length. Behind the window was an amber-colored liquid. Fuel of some kind, he guessed.

“It wasn't even that hard,” Sera said. There was no hint of bragging in her voice. It wasn't some lame attempt to fish for compliments. To her, it was just plain true.

Dak looked up at her. “So let me get this straight. My parents, who have PhDs from Amancio University and SQIT, have been working on this

device for twenty years, and you figured it all out in a couple of days?”

Sera shrugged. “They helped. A little.”

Dak threw up his arms.

“Hey, careful with that!” Sera snapped. She snatched it away from him. “For the love of mincemeat. I’m just kidding, and you know it. They did most of the work — ninety-nine-point-nine percent of it. Maybe they just needed someone with fresh eyes to come in and seal the deal. Figure out the missing piece of the puzzle. Like I said, it was —”

“Yeah, I know,” Dak interrupted. “Easy. Piece of cake. Like . . . naming the presidents in order of how old they were when they got elected. Kid’s stuff. But how do you know for sure that it *does* work?”

“Because all the formulas are balanced. The mechanics of it make sense now. I’d go into more detail, but based on how *riveted* you were by my earlier explanations, I think I’ll spare you the pain. But I know it works. The same way you know that two plus two is four.”

“Thanks for keeping it at my level. Anyway, what do we do now, genius?”

A huge smile lit up her face. “We tell your parents all about it.”

He suddenly wanted to throw up and run to China.



Dak’s parents were due home around seven o’clock that evening. His grandma figured he was a big boy and could take care of himself between dinner and their arrival, so she packed up, gave him a creaky hug, and went home. Dak loved her to death, but she had barely moved out of her chair in the guest room since showing up, so he wasn’t quite sure why she was there in the first place. In case he needed a knitted sweater out of the blue?

The last half hour waiting for his mom and dad to walk through the front door was agonizing. He and Sera sat on the couch in the living room, the *tick tick tick* of the clock on the wall the only sound.

Dak’s hands were slick with sweat. There just wasn’t any way that this could go down without getting ugly. He tried to think about how he’d break the news, and nothing sounded right. Not a single historical anecdote seemed appropriate to soften the blow. Taking the keys alone was enough to

make his dad turn beet red and get his mom shrieking like a diseased monkey.

Three minutes after seven the door opened.

His mom stepped inside, holding a small suitcase in one hand and a giant purse in the other. His dad followed with the rest of their luggage. He shut the door with an elbow, then both of them noticed Dak and Sera sitting before them in silence.

“Well howdy do!” his dad said, a little too loudly. Dak didn’t think anyone would ever need to know anything else about his father except that the man often said the words *Well howdy do!* That pretty much said it all.

“What are you two little munchkins up to?” his mom asked as she put her things down. “How nice of you to greet us — our own private welcoming committee! Where’s the band and the cocktails?” She snorted a laugh, something that sounded like a pig getting tickled.

And these two people were geniuses. *Well*, Dak thought, *gotta love ’em.*

“Now where are my hugs?” his mom said with a mock hurt face. “Don’t just sit there all day like two bumps on a pickle! Come over here.”

Dak stood up . . . and suddenly had an idea. There was only one way to tell this story and survive to see the next day: backward.

“Mom, Dad,” he said, hoping to make it clear that he had something serious to tell them.

Both of them had made it about halfway into the living room, but now they stopped and stared. They’d sensed it all right.

Dak smiled, trying to show what good news he had. “The Infinity Ring works now. She’s all ready to go.”

Dak’s mom and dad both had confused looks on their faces, as if they mostly thought he was kidding but weren’t completely sure.

“Come again?” his mom finally asked.

Dak stuck with telling the story backward — he wanted to leave that little tidbit about him stealing their keys until the very end. “It took all weekend, but Sera was able to fill in your missing piece, and now it works.”

Sera was fidgeting beside him, still on the couch, her knees bouncing. His parents shared a look that he couldn’t quite read.

Dak decided to keep going, thinking this just might work without an explosion of rage, groundings, unnecessary murders, stuff like that. “Look,

we can fill in all the details later — but this is exciting, right? We need to get out there! Sera can explain, but the Infinity Ring is ready to be tested!”

“Who else knows about this?” Dak’s mom said. Her voice was flat and commanding — it actually scared Dak a little.

“What . . . what do you mean?” he asked. Sera stood beside him now, and he could tell she sensed the bad shift in the mood.

Dak’s mother put her hands on his shoulders. “This is important, son. Did you tell anyone what you were up to? Anyone at all? Your grandmother, maybe? Sera’s uncle?”

“No,” Dak said. He looked over at Sera, who shook her head. “Mom, what’s going on?”

Dak’s dad drew the curtains closed, his face pinched with worry. “This isn’t a *game*, Dak. What on *earth* were you thinking?”

He yelled that last bit, something Dak had never, not once, experienced before.

“I’m sorry, Dad. But . . . we figured it out.”

“You also might’ve signed our death warrants,” his mom replied.

“We can’t waste another second,” his dad said. “Show us.”



## The Breathless Wait

THE NEXT couple of hours were a complete nightmare. First, Dak had to sit through Sera's explanations on how everything worked and how she'd figured it out. His parents were short and bitter as they asked questions and demanded answers. Then Sera's uncle came over and caused a major scene when he started screaming and yelling. Somehow Dak's dad was able to calm the old geezer down, convince him that Sera desperately needed their help with an important homework project, and send him on his way.

Then there was another hour of scientific mumbo jumbo that just about drove Dak over the edge. Just when he thought he couldn't take any more, he heard someone say his name. His head jerked up and he realized he'd been staring at the floor.

His dad was standing right in front of him, arms folded across his chest. "Maybe you should try listening harder — you might learn something."

"Science isn't my thing, Dad." They'd had this conversation a million times. The truth was that Dak did well enough in the subject at school, but it just didn't interest him. And they were talking about things well beyond anything he'd learned in school anyway. "But I'd be happy to tell you about

the political implications after pyroglycerine was developed by Italy in 1847.”

Sera and his mom were still bent over a SQuare, gesticulating and talking in an excited rush. His mom had the Ring gripped in her left hand. Dak returned his attention to his dad, whose stern expression made his face look like hard stone. Both of his parents looked older than ever before, like they’d aged twenty years in a matter of days.

And then the lecture began. “I don’t think I need to tell you how disappointed I am that you broke some of our most sacred rules. A lot of bad things could’ve happened. Not just to our research, but to you. Quantum mechanics is *not* something to be messed with. Not to even mention the fact that certain parties wouldn’t be very happy to learn about what we’ve been up to here. Do you understand why we’re so upset?”

“Yes, sir.” Dak showed a sad face but on the inside he was leaping with joy — this was the lamest, shortest discipline speech he’d ever gotten. “I’m sorry.”

His dad smiled. “I think she did it, Dak. I think this thing will really work.”

“You’re serious?” Dak was pretty sure he should be more excited about the time-travel device than his escape from punishment, but at the moment it was a tie.

“Dead serious.” Dak’s dad looked over his shoulder at his wife and Sera, then back at Dak. “We’ll try to act like all is normal until tomorrow afternoon, throw the scent off if there is one. Then your mom and I are going to do a test run. For your sake, Dak, I hope the SQ somehow missed your shenanigans.”



Dak had experienced some long days at school before. But this one was ridiculous. Knowing that when he got home, he was going to witness something momentous sort of put a damper on the usual school-day fare.

It was nearly four thirty when Dak, Sera, and Dak’s parents were finally gathered in the laboratory, sitting around a table, facing one another with grim looks that didn’t completely hide their excitement. Dak had always

thought of his parents as a little bit on the goofy side, but they were all business now.

“Okay,” Dak’s mom said, leaning forward on her elbows. “You kids ready for this?” Evidently she included her husband in the subject of that question. When all three nodded, she continued. “Good. The plan is this: The two of us are going to take a very brief trip, then come right back here. We’d like you two to stay in the lab in case . . . well, to make sure everything goes as planned.”

“You’re *both* going?” asked Dak. “With a single Ring?”

Dak’s dad answered with a stiff nod. “The device works by warping the fabric of space-time to create a wormhole — basically a tunnel that leads from wherever you’re standing to wherever you’ve programmed the device to take you. But it doesn’t just transport the person who’s holding the Ring. In addition to the pilot, any person that the pilot is touching will get pulled along for the ride.”

“And so will inanimate objects,” his mom added. “Though there are limits as to how much mass we can take with us. If I were to use the Ring in a car, the car wouldn’t travel back in time with me. But the seat belt I was wearing might. Got it?”

“Got it,” Dak and Sera said in unison.

“We’d bring you a souvenir, honey, but we can’t interfere with the past,” his mom said. “Even stepping on a bug could have ripple effects that drastically alter the future. I mean, the present.” She gave a little snort-chuckle then, for the first time since she’d learned the Ring was operational.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t until then that the reality began to sink in for Dak. The idea itself had seemed so cool, but now it hit him hard and heavy. Panic flared inside him. What if his parents blinked out of existence and never came back? He couldn’t imagine letting them go, then being left to wonder what had happened to them.

They apparently didn’t share his concerns.

Dak’s mom stood up. “Okay. Let’s quit talking and let’s get warping.”





## The Infinity Ring

EVERYONE JOINED Dak's mom at the glass case, where she carefully pulled out the Infinity Ring and held the shiny silver loop in her hands like a strange steering wheel. "Your dad and I decided last night that we want to protect this investment from being stolen and used by others. We can do that by keying the device to our DNA. No one else will ever be able to use it. Other Rings can be built when and if we share the technology, but this prototype is our family's and no one else's. Sera, we're including you because of your obvious and amazing contributions."

"Me?" Sera said. "You want me to do it, too?"

"Of course," Dak's mom answered. "I know we've been harsh, but it's only because we care about you both. We want you to feel included, and if everything goes smoothly today, we may bring you two along on a later voyage. We might even need you to control the device if we've got our hands full."

Sera nodded. Dak had never seen her look so proud before.

One by one, they each pricked their thumb on a sterile medical device that plugged right into a port on the side of the Ring. Then Dak's mom and

dad each took a turn doing some programming, conferring with each other to make sure everything was absolutely correct. And then it was time.

“The Ring is programmed with the appropriate coordinates,” Dak’s dad said. “We’re planning on spending a few minutes at our destination. But the beauty of time travel is that theoretically we can be back here just a split second after we leave.”

“Theoretically?” repeated Dak.

“So for us, this trip will last a few minutes,” said Dak’s mom. “But from your perspective, we’ll be back in the blink of an eye.”

“Now step back, kids,” said her husband. “And cross your fingers.”

Dak looked on anxiously as his mom pushed a small button on the Infinity Ring. A hum filled the room, like a hive of bees had just awakened. There was a tingly vibration in the air, as if someone had just dinged a thousand tuning forks.

The dark amber liquid within the Ring glowed bright orange, filling the lab with light.

Dak suddenly couldn’t take it anymore. “We’re going, too!” He grabbed Sera by the hand and reached out to grip his father’s elbow.

He barely had time to see his parents’ shocked faces before everything around them exploded into a tube of light and sound that sucked the lab away and threw their bodies into a chaotic spin. Flashes of alternating color and darkness flew past him but he couldn’t keep his eyes open long enough to see any detail. His ears popped and his tongue swelled and his stomach rolled and the world seemed to press in on him. He tried to scream but the awful noise was so loud he couldn’t even tell if he’d done it. Pinpricks of pain broke out all over him, *inside* him, as if he were beginning to crack like an eggshell, about to burst into a million pieces at any second.

And then, just as quickly as it had started, it ended.

Dak found himself standing on a flattened patch of grass under a sunny blue sky. His parents and Sera were right next to him, all three of them looking at him with fire in their eyes.

He quickly dropped Sera’s hand.

“I’m sorry!” Dak blurted. “I couldn’t stand the thought of waiting around, wondering what happened to you guys.”

Dak’s dad pointed a finger at him. “You have no idea what you’ve —”

A roar behind them cut off his words. Dak spun around to see the source — about a hundred yards away, scores of soldiers dressed in red coats and white pants came running over the crest of a hill. Each one of them held a long rifle with a blade attached to the end. Dak was suddenly in his element, and the coolness of what he saw before him overwhelmed any sense of fear or guilt.

These were British soldiers, and those blades on the end of their guns were called bayonets. The muskets they carried weren't like modern-day weapons that could shoot bullet after bullet in rapid succession. It took a lot longer to shoot just one bullet — or ball — with the guns that were pointed at them now. That was why they had the bayonets, so the soldiers could fight like sword-wielding knights when it came to that.

“No way!” Dak said. “You guys were going to visit the Revolutionary War without me?”

“This isn't a game!” Dak's dad shouted.

“We have a hundred men charging in to kill us,” his mom said rather calmly.

Dak had to admit that the bayonets seemed slightly less cool the closer they got.

Sera pointed at a copse of trees about thirty yards away, out of the direct path of the small army. “Let's run over there. They're obviously not after us, because they didn't know we existed thirty seconds ago. We just happened to land in their path.”

Dak knew she was right. She was logical like that. “Good thinking.”

The four of them ran to the spot she'd indicated and slipped through the outer layer of trees to crouch behind some bushes. The soldiers had surely seen them, but Dak hoped they wouldn't worry about a stray family — albeit a stray family in strange clothing.

The army had come into full view now, running down the slope to the area where Dak and the others had appeared out of nowhere. When they reached that spot, the soldiers were ordered to halt by a commanding officer. Then, without any kind of instruction, they lined up in three perfectly straight rows, still facing the direction in which they'd been heading.

“I need to fine-tune some of the satellite grid inputs,” Dak's dad whispered. “Everything dealing with location is based on how things are

mapped out in the future by the GPS system, but it's not quite accurate enough. And we obviously don't have the satellites now. We were supposed to be about a mile from here so we could watch this from a safe distance."

"Where are we?" Sera asked. "And . . . *when* are we?"

Dak jumped all over that. "We're smack-dab in the middle of the Revolutionary War. Those are British soldiers and they're obviously expecting a battle with some American militiamen. Keep watching and you'll see how organized and rigid the British are, and how wild and crazy the Americans are. I can't believe I'm seeing this!"

His mom shushed him. "Quiet down!"

Dak felt an almost unbearable thrill of excitement as it finally hit him what was going on. They'd just traveled through time! He'd just leapt back hundreds of years using a device dreamed up by his own parents and perfected by his best friend. Judging by the half-glazed look on Sera's face, she was coming to the same world-altering realization.

Movement out in the ranks grabbed his attention. Three red-coated soldiers were running toward them, guns raised.

"You there!" one of them shouted. "American spies! Come out or we'll shoot!" He and his partners kept coming at full speed.

"*That's* not good," Dak said. "Do you know what they did to American spies? Because I do, and —"

Sera silenced him with a glance.

"What do we do?" Dak's mom asked.

"Don't worry," her husband answered with forced calm. He was pressing buttons on the Infinity Ring. "Keep your heads down. I'm almost there."

One of the soldiers fired a shot, smoke and fire flashing from the muzzle of his weapon. The ball smashed into a tree right next to Dak's head.

"Almost there!" his dad repeated.

But it was too late. The soldiers crashed into the trees, throwing their weapons down and grabbing at the visitors from the future. The biggest redcoat pulled Sera by the shirt, ripping her off her feet. Dak moved in to help her but the man swung a fist, slamming it into Dak's cheek. He fell to the ground, dazed. The other two soldiers tussled with his parents, pushing

at them roughly. Dak caught a glimpse of his dad, struggling to hide the Infinity Ring and work on it at the same time as he was being roughed up.

Dak's mom tore loose and fell on Dak, pulling him into her arms. Sera ripped herself free at the same time and jumped toward them. They huddled as a group and backed into his dad, who still fidgeted with the device.

There was a humming sound. The trees around them started to shake. Dak saw one of the soldiers pick up a gun he'd dropped. The bayonet on the end glinted in the sunlight, breaking through the branches above them. He lifted the gun like a spear and charged at their small group. Sera's arms came up as if she could actually deflect the vicious blade.

Everything around them turned into chaos and color and sound.

Dak, his parents, Sera — all of them were ripped from the copse of trees, sucked into a wormhole. In that blur of movement and noise, Dak felt as if his body were frozen, but the others seemed to be moving. Dak's mom had let go and turned to hug her husband, and the two of them looked as if they were dancing, the edges of their skin tendriling out like streams of their soul being torn away.

Someone squeezed Dak's hand — he forced his head to move as if through a thick liquid or a tremendous wind, and he saw Sera looking at him. Still they flew through the wormhole, the rush of noise almost deafening.

An object was in Dak's other hand. He knew it by touch: the Infinity Ring. When had his father given it to him? He didn't have time to think, just gripped it in his fingers. The lights grew brighter, the sound impossibly louder. Dak screamed but the sound of it was lost in the madness.

Then it all ended. Dak and Sera appeared on the floor of the lab.

There was no sign of his parents. Anywhere.



## **Black Hoods and Black Cars**

SERA COULDN'T quite process what was wrong at first. She'd just had the craziest ten minutes of her entire life, and now she stood back in the quiet lab of Mr. and Mrs. Smyth. Her mind felt a little bent, as if it had just gone up in an airplane and done loops. Parts of her body were hot and other parts were cold. Dak stood next to her, staring at something in his hands. She followed his gaze and saw that he clutched the Infinity Ring.

The soldiers were nowhere to be seen — but neither were Dak's parents. He was frozen, his eyes glued to the Ring.

"Dak," Sera whispered.

His free hand shot up, palm toward her, telling her to be quiet.

She let a few seconds pass but couldn't stand it anymore. "Dak, what do \_\_\_"

"Be quiet!" he yelled. "They're going to show up any second now."

Sera felt a painful thumping in her chest, a mix of panic and aching hurt for Dak. Something terrible had happened, and she wasn't sure why. But if his parents hadn't appeared yet, they weren't going to appear at all.

"Dak, listen to me. . . ."

He turned toward her, his face at first full of fire and anger. But it quickly melted into despair. His lips trembled.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice cracking. “Where are they?”

“I don’t know.” In that moment she felt responsible — had she messed something up in her calculations? “I’m sorry.” She hated that her words sounded so empty.

Dak turned on her, thrusting the Infinity Ring into her hands. “Fix this! Help them! Do something!”

“Dak, we’ll figure this out, but you need to calm down,” she said.

“Easy for you to say! You have no idea . . .” He started pacing around the room, looking as if he wanted something to kick.

But before he found anything there was a sudden explosion behind them.

Sera screamed and fell to the floor, instinctively turning her body to avoid landing on the Ring. Lights danced before her eyes as the huge iron door jumped a couple of feet forward then fell down, its ringing *boom* shaking the entire building.

Then came the people. They stormed into the lab in the wake of the tremendous crash — people dressed head to toe in black. At least a dozen of them.

*Oh, no,* thought Sera. *It’s the SQ.*

Dak freaked out, punching wildly at the intruders as Sera scrambled to her feet. She was shocked and confused and suddenly terrified that these people were going to put a bullet in Dak’s brain.

“Dak! Stop it!” she shouted, but he seemed like he’d lost his mind. Several men tackled him to the ground, subduing him roughly.

Sera didn’t know what to do. Her only thought was that she could use the Infinity Ring to get them out of there, but she’d barely had the idea before people were grabbing her, taking the Ring out of her hands. She kicked and flailed to no avail, screaming at the black-clothed thugs.

“Both of you calm down!” someone yelled at them. “We’re doing this for your own good!”

But Sera and Dak didn’t stop fighting as the intruders dragged them through the door and away from the laboratory.



They finally stopped thrashing once they were locked in the backseat of a car and black hoods were pulled over their heads. Sera fumbled for the door handle, but it was locked tight. It took a while for the two of them to calm their breathing, but silence eventually fell over them as the vehicle drove for miles and miles.

Dak didn't make a peep as they rocketed through endless unseen streets. But every once in a while his shoulder trembled, and she knew he was stifling a sob. She wished she could talk to him, tell him that she knew all too well what it was like to have missing parents. Even though she'd never met her own, the pain was like a hole in her heart. But she couldn't find the words.

If she couldn't cheer him up, she could at least try to keep him safe. She resolved to do whatever it took to get him out of this mess.

On they went, turn after turn, the car silent, the mood gloomy.

What light Sera could see through the coarse fabric of the hood suddenly cut out when the car pitched downward then upright again, as if they'd gone underground or into the lower floor of a garage. There was a bang of metal and the vehicle bounced before speeding forward again.

Soon they came to a stop. Someone escorted them out of the car and led them forward, steering Sera by her elbow. Although Sera couldn't see where they were going, she kept her ears trained on Dak's shuffling footsteps. There didn't seem to be much point in fighting, but if they dared to separate her from Dak, she would try.

Their captors didn't take the hood off her until they'd reached a metal door. Sera quickly looked around. They were in a dark garage, just as she'd guessed, but only a few cars were parked there. It seemed to have been carved out of rock, with uneven walls and ceiling. Dak wouldn't look her in the eyes. A blond man had them each by the arm, and he nodded toward the silvery door.

"Down the elevator we go," he said. "Then all of your questions will be answered."

Down the elevator they went.





Three floors down. A long hallway. A right turn, a left turn, and a second left. Another long hallway. Sera thought she'd keep track in case they had the chance to make an escape, but wherever they were, the place was built like a labyrinth.

And then, finally, they reached a small room with a table and four chairs. Two of those were occupied, by a man and a woman. They were both about the age of Dak's parents. The man looked a little goofy — big nose, black hair sticking up — but the woman was stunningly beautiful, with dark skin and a flawless face. Sera wished Dak was in the mood to make one of his famously awkward historical speeches in an attempt to break the ice. It might bore everyone else, but right now it would lift her spirits. Dak remained silent, though. His face was sallow and droopy, and his eyes were red and moist.

On the table was a spread of food that looked too good to be true. Fruit and cheese and cakes and pastries. Sera's stomach rumbled with hunger. The traitor.

The blond guard motioned for Dak and Sera to take the two empty chairs. Then, to their enormous surprise, he handed the Infinity Ring to Dak. "We'll be right outside if you need us," the guard said to the woman. She simply nodded.

The door closed behind him, and a weighty silence settled on the room. Dak clutched the Infinity Ring to his chest.

The man spoke first. "Well. Dak and Sera. We have so much to say to you. It's hard to even know where to start."

"Don't you think we should start by telling them our *names*?" the woman asked, giving her partner a reproving glare.

"Oh, yes, of course we should." The man cleared his throat. "My name is Brint, and this is my colleague, Mari. We, um, both know who you are. Although I guess you've figured that out by now. Please feel free to help yourselves to some food. If there's anything else you want —"

Sera had reached the end of her rope. "We had a fridge full of food back at Dak's house. You know, where we were when your goons trespassed on

private property, set off explosives, and *kidnapped* us? We're not in very good moods, and what we *want* is to know what's going on!"

Brint had flinched at Sera's outburst, leaning back as far as he could in his chair, a look of complete shock on his face. Mari hadn't moved a muscle.

"Well?" Sera pushed.

"I like your spirit," Mari said quietly. "You're going to need it for what we're about to ask of you. But rein in the outbursts and Brint will tell you everything you need to know. Brint?"

Sera watched as the man shifted in his seat uncomfortably. It was obvious who was really in charge here. But Brint quickly recovered and took on a serious air as he leaned forward and folded his hands on the table.

"We're members of a group called the Hystorians," he began. "You wouldn't have heard of us, but our organization goes back many, many centuries. It was founded by the great philosopher Aristotle in 336 BC. We've lasted in a continuous line ever since, united in a common goal to one day save the world from a disaster that only a visionary like Aristotle could have predicted. And today you've given us the biggest breakthrough since he spoke of that vision. Time travel."

Sera glanced over at Dak, who sat up a little straighter, eyes focused on Brint. She was sure he felt the same relief she did — they hadn't been taken by the SQ after all. *If* these people weren't lying.

"Time travel?" Dak asked. "What does that have to do with Aristotle?"

Brint tightened his lips and nodded. "It has everything to do with him. He knew time travel would be possible someday, and he knew what it would be needed for. To go back and correct the Great Breaks. To remove the Remnants that haunt us. To set right the world's course and prevent reality from ending in a fiery Cataclysm."

The man paused and gave a long look to Sera, then Dak. "History is broken, and we need your help to fix it."



## The Hystorians

THERE WAS an emptiness inside Dak unlike anything he'd ever experienced. The shock and anger of losing his parents had worn off, leaving a numbness that was somehow worse. Numbness, and confusion. He had no idea what had happened, which wasn't entirely surprising. The bad news was that Sera didn't seem to know either. All he could say for sure was that they were gone, and the ache was like a choking smoke in his lungs.

But Brint's words had pierced through the haze. Dak felt a spark of something. It wasn't quite enough to make him forget his misery. But it was enough to get him interested.

"What does that *mean*?" Dak asked. "Fix history?"

"The world is not *right*, Dak, Sera. It's gone off the rails, and we needed time travel to get it back on course."

"But . . ." Sera began. "But history's, well, *history*, isn't it?"

"Let me start from the beginning," Brint suggested. "We don't have a lot of time — pardon the irony — but you two need to have a general understanding of what we're dealing with. Are you ready for the story?"

Sera gave Dak a look that told him she was worried that he was going to fall apart at any second. And he probably *would* fall apart if he got any

sympathy right now. So he put on a dopey grin and rubbed his hands together.

“I’m always ready for a story that starts with Aristotle,” he said.

Brint smiled. “Aristotle is my personal hero. He was one of the greatest minds of his time or any before it. As such, he was chosen at the age of forty-one by the king of Macedon, King Philip II, to become the tutor of his son, Alexander. Aristotle felt in his heart that Alexander would go on to do great things. He felt this very, very strongly — he even called the boy Alexander the Great so that he’d be aware of what was expected of him. But it all went wrong.

“In 336 BC, Alexander and his father were assassinated by a man named Attalus, the king’s own father-in-law, so that the grandson of Attalus could be the next king instead of Alexander. That boy was Karanos, Alexander’s half brother, and he did indeed become the next ruler, and went on to oversee a time of terrible darkness for Asia. Aristotle was devastated. He never really got over it.”

Now Dak was truly fascinated. He knew this story, of course — he’d been on a major ancient Greece kick just a few years before — but he had no idea what it had to do with anything that was going on now. He listened intently as the man continued, almost managing to ignore the ache that still swelled within his chest.

“Aristotle had an understanding of the world and its workings that far surpassed anyone of his period. He believed the universe had an order to it, that there is a fabric of reality in which the stories of life are woven. And deep in his heart, he knew, absolutely knew, that Alexander was not supposed to have been murdered that day. Alexander’s death represented a tear in the very fabric of reality. And, being the visionary man that he was, Aristotle planned to *make things right*.”

“How?” Dak and Sera asked together.

Dak went further. “How did he plan on reversing a murder?”

Mari answered this time, tucking her hair behind an ear. “Time travel. He believed it was possible — not in his own era, but someday. He held out hope that mankind would develop the means to navigate the time stream. To go back and correct the things that didn’t go the way they were supposed to go. Because if Alexander’s fate had gone wrong, it seemed to him that other

problems would likely arise as time marched on. He called these incidents Breaks, and Alexander the Great's murder was only the first."

"But people die every day!" Sera said. "And think about how many horrible things have happened throughout history. All the wars, all the abuse, all the suffering. How could we possibly go back and stop every tragedy?"

Mari was shaking her head before Sera had even finished. "It's not like that. This isn't necessarily about *bad* things that have happened. For good or ill, most of history is part of the natural fabric of reality. We're talking about events that never should have happened to begin with."

"I don't buy it," Sera said.

"Sera . . ." Dak began.

"No! Dak, you're too trusting. I can understand that this Aristotle guy was torn up over his student getting killed. I totally get that he'd wish he could go back and change what had happened. But who is he to decide what was *supposed* to happen and what wasn't? How could he possibly know that?"

"Because of the Remnant," Brint answered. The cheeriness in his voice had disappeared entirely. He caught Sera's eyes. "Ah. I think you know what I mean. I think you've experienced a Remnant yourself, haven't you? They're unpleasant as a general rule. And Aristotle experienced the very first Remnant in history."

"That definitely wasn't in the biography I read," said Dak. "And it was a very long biography."

"It wouldn't have made any of the public records," Mari explained. "Aristotle had a traumatic vision at Alexander's funeral — a vision of the great man and leader that Alexander would have become. But he knew better than to speak of it — after all, Karanos was king now, and suggesting that he *shouldn't* be king would have been treason. So Aristotle only shared this knowledge with a small group of trusted friends and students. These were the first Hystorians, and they began a tradition that's stretched throughout centuries and across continents, documenting the subsequent Breaks. In effect, we've been recording an entire secret history."

"A secret history?" echoed Dak. "You mean there's *more* history to learn?"

Sera only rolled her eyes.

Brint cleared his throat. “And all of that leads us to the Cataclysm. More than a dozen Breaks have been officially listed as matching Aristotle’s criteria. Everything from the kidnapping of a First Lady, to a botched mission in Europe during World War Two that had significant consequences. These Breaks not only led to undesirable outcomes, they severely damaged *reality itself*. The Remnants are one consequence of that. The increasingly intense natural disasters are another. Everything is falling apart, as you must be more than aware.”

Dak thought about that — his knowledge of history left no doubt that the rate of earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and volcano eruptions had increased dramatically over the last hundred years. But to think that was somehow tied to certain events in history taking an unplanned route was . . . crazy. Just plain crazy.

“I can see those wheels spinning in your head,” Brint said to him. “I know this all must seem unlikely. But I swear to you, with all my honor as a Hystorian — and I’ve devoted my life to this — that what we’re telling you is true.”

“It’s a lot more complicated than we’ve laid it out,” Mari added. “But this is the gist of it. Aristotle created a society that would diligently track and pass down records of the Great Breaks throughout the years, hoping that someday the Hystorians would pioneer time travel and go back to correct what went wrong. And that’s where we stand today.”

Brint tapped his finger on the table. “Of course, there’s an even more immediate danger than earthquakes or Remnants.”

Dak waited, wondering, *What now?*

“The SQ,” Brint announced. “They’ve been around just as long as the Hystorians, though they’ve been known by many names. And where the rest of the world has suffered, they’ve actually benefited from the Breaks. As you might imagine, they’re not thrilled with the idea that somebody might change that.”

“What Brint is trying to say,” Mari continued, “is that the SQ has eyes and ears everywhere. And if they were to catch wind of what we’re up to here, they’d kill us all without hesitation.”

“We can keep you safe,” Brint said. “But only if you give us that Ring.”



## A Dangerous Turn

SERA DIDN'T like Brint's tone — she didn't like this turn in the conversation at all. She quickly squeezed Dak's hand before her friend could say anything. They had to play this right.

"I think the stakes are well-defined here," Brint continued. "We need that Ring so we can reverse engineer it. Make our own. And begin the process of fixing history." He and Mari looked squarely at Dak, who held the Ring clutched to his chest.

"Um," Dak started before Sera could stop him. "I don't know. All this stuff you're saying makes sense, I guess, but . . . *I* need the Ring. I have to find my mom and dad."

Sera knew Dak could be talked into anything — he was trusting to a fault. That meant it was up to her to protect their interests here, and she had no problem speaking up. "How did you people even know we *had* an operating time-travel device? Were you monitoring the area for stray chronon particles?"

Brint's eyes flickered to Mari's. "Um, yes, that's exactly how we knew what you were up to."

Sera scoffed at how easily she'd tricked them. "There's no such thing as a chronon! The Hystorians have been spying on the Smyths all along, haven't they? You're no better than the SQ!"

Brint stuttered and stammered. Mari cleared her throat, stepping in to take charge of the conversation. "Okay. Yes. We've been . . . monitoring Dak's parents. But we're not like the SQ, I promise you. We've only done what we have for the good of the world. How do you think the Smyths got the money they needed for their research, anyway? The Hystorians have been funding them all along, in secret, providing grants that they didn't know came from us."

"Which, by the way," Brint interjected, "gives us partial claim to the Ring technology."

Sera took a moment to consider her next move. Brint and Mari seemed genuine enough. But she didn't dare let the Ring out of her sight — not until Dak's parents were safe. And if Brint and Mari had been monitoring the lab, they knew that the Ring was all but useless without Sera's know-how . . . and without Dak or Sera to activate it. That was an advantage she could use.

"If you knew anything about this technology," she said, "you'd know that it would take months to make your own device. At least."

Brint and Mari exchanged a long, worried look. It was obvious they didn't have that kind of time.

"You need us," Dak blurted out, the excitement sparking in his eyes as he caught on to Sera's train of thought. "You need us to use our own device. We have to pilot the thing." He turned to Sera. "We can do this. We can do all of it at once! Find my parents. Save the world. Maybe even get rid of the Remnants."

For some reason, that hit her in the gut like a punch. Would not having a false memory of her parents be better? Or worse? She didn't even want to think about it.

But she could see that Brint and Mari knew that Dak was right. The Hystorians *did* need them. "We'll help you," she said, "but we'll only do it if you promise to help us find Dak's parents. Take it or leave it."

"You'll have to leave the dirty work to the adults," Brint said. He turned to Mari, waiting until she gave a reluctant nod before he continued. "While we devote resources here to figuring out what happened to Dak's parents,



you can act as escorts for a crack team of Hystorians. Our people will do the actual work of fixing the Breaks, but their lives will depend on you two getting them where they need to be. And following their orders to the letter. There are the Time Wardens to worry about, after all.”

“Time Wardens?” Dak repeated.

“When I said the SQ had eyes and ears everywhere, I didn’t just mean in the present,” Mari explained. “You see, if it weren’t for the Breaks, the SQ might not hold all the power they do in the world today. Their Lady in Red may not be as omniscient, seeing all. So while we’ve been hoping all along for time travel to become a reality, the SQ has been dreading it. Just as we’ve sworn to someday go back and change the past, they’ve sworn not to let that happen. And they’ve had people trained in every generation to stop the mission we’re about to undertake.”

“There are people in the past specifically on the lookout for time travelers?” Sera asked. “That’s crazy!”

“It’s good strategy,” Mari countered. “They’re called Time Wardens. And if they ever even *suspect* that someone has come back from the future, they’re instructed to kill them without blinking an eye.”

Sera felt a shiver of fear at that. The room fell silent, as if Brint and Mari wanted to give everyone a moment to process the danger they would be in.

Dak broke the ice. “Fine. We’ll leave the scary stuff to the adults. Now are you guys ever going to let us eat this food?”

“By all means,” Mari replied, smiling as she pushed the platter toward Dak. “There’s even some fine cheese hidden in there somewhere.”

Dak and Sera dug in without saying another word. Mari seemed pleased with the outcome they’d agreed on, but Sera could feel anxious energy coming off of Brint. He was clearly ready to put them all to work.

“Let’s walk to the operations center,” he said after everyone else had enjoyed a quick helping of treats. “That is . . . if you’re done eating?”

Dak whipped his hand out and grabbed one last cube of Swiss then stuffed it in his mouth. “Now I am,” he mumbled while chewing.



As they walked down a long, dimly lit hallway, Mari gave them a few more details about what lay ahead. Sera listened eagerly.

“In addition to the trained members of our society that we’ll send back with you,” the woman said, “there’s also a local Hystorian already living in the vicinity of most of the Breaks. We’ve had a steady membership of Hystorians since Aristotle’s time, spread out in branches all over the world. Their locations are hidden, but every single one of us has always been trained to look for people from the future.”

“Why can’t they just fix the Breaks themselves?” Sera asked. “Or prevent them?”

Dak gave her a look that, even in the relative darkness, left no doubt she had said something ridiculous, and she quickly blurted out the answer to her own question before he could. “Oh, duh. Wasn’t thinking. They don’t know what a Break is until after it’s happened.”

“Exactly,” Mari responded. “The Hystorians have always analyzed major events of the world, and, aided in part by the appearance of new Remnants, decided well after the fact if an event is an official Break or not. But they also know that someone may show up one day and tell them of an event that is *about* to take place. They’re trained to prepare for that possibility. You’re the pilots, mainly. Messengers. Remember that. The adults will be ready to do what needs to be done.”

Dak bristled. “Hey, we’re not moron wimps, ya know. We can help, too.”

“I don’t doubt that at all,” Mari said as they came to a halt in front of a large steel door. She pulled something out of a leather satchel she had slung around her shoulder — a Square slate device — and held it up for them to see.

“All of the information you need will be downloaded to this,” she said. “Don’t worry — we’ve completely overwritten the SQ software, and there are so many firewalls built around this thing that it’s more secure than your own brains. It will have all the information your team will need, although, again, it’ll be encoded.”

“It’s all part of a system called The Art of Memory,” Brint added. “Or TAM for short. It was actually devised by Aristotle so that data could be passed down from generation to generation without risking it falling into

the hands of our enemies. Trust me when I tell you that it's gonna drive you bonkers sometimes. But you can do it."

"I'll bet I can do it with my eyes closed," said Dak.

"That doesn't even make any sense," said Sera.

Mari slipped the Square back into the satchel then gestured at the menacing door. "This is the HOC — Hystorian Operations Center. Are you two ready?"

Sera glanced over at Dak, who was actually smiling. *Smiling*. Maybe he'd survive his parents' disappearance after all. They both nodded at each other with knowing looks.

"We're ready," Sera said, right before Dak added his own confirmation:

"The Time Nerds are a go."



## Lady in Red

MARI ACTIVATED a touch screen to the right of the door and input a long series of numbers and letters, a longer password than Dak had ever seen anyone use before. This Art of Memory thing seemed for real, and he found himself wishing he hadn't been so boastful about it. Now he had to live up to the expectation.

A *hiss* sounded, followed by a hollow, grating *scratch* as the metal bars of the lock pulled back. Then the door popped open and swung outward with a heavy groan.

"In we go," Mari said, holding an arm out to indicate the two kids should go first.

Dak gripped the cool surface of the Infinity Ring in his hand and stepped through the opening. Applause broke out and he saw at least twenty people standing up to clap from their various stations of computers and radar screens and monitors and other equipment. They all had hopeful smiles, and for the first time Dak felt the pressure of what they were being asked to do.

Save the world. No biggie, right?

Mari and Brint led them around a wide walkway that skirted the outside edge of the massive operations center. The central focal point was a monitor as big as a movie screen, but instead of displaying a single image it was broken up into dozens of views — everything from live video feed to running numbers to Doppler radar maps.

While Brint plugged the SQuare into a computer, Mari stepped up to a podium that overlooked the crew of workers at their stations. “I want everyone to meet our new Hystorians, granted membership without the usual years of proving ground. Urgent times call for urgent doings. This is Dak, and this is Sera.”

Another round of applause met this statement, and Dak suddenly felt like the biggest idiot ever born. He’d just wanted to whip out the Ring and start touring history. Save the world and find his parents while he was at it. But here was an entire room full of people who were devoting their lives to a noble cause, hoping all along that someone would come along and give them the means to stop an unending series of tragedies.

Mari continued her speech. “We have a lot to do over the next couple of days before we send Dak, Sera, and our insertion squad back in time to fix the Breaks. Our current plan is to begin the operation at 0800 hours on Thursday. I know everyone’s eager to begin, but we need two days to fully prep our new associates.”

She went on to say more, but Dak tuned out. He was having a heavy episode of missing his parents, worrying about what could’ve happened to them. Two days was a long time to do nothing. And while he was here, they were out there somewhere — lost, possibly hurt, maybe running afoul of one of the Time Wardens. Finally, he understood a little about Sera’s haunting Remnant. Loss, mixed with a maddening uncertainty.

He noticed Brint was looking at him expectantly.

“Um, oh, sorry,” Dak stuttered. “Did I miss something?”

Brint smiled. “I asked if you were ready to start meeting people.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

And so they started making the rounds, but all the names and faces quickly became a jumble to Dak. Some dude who was in charge of tracking natural disasters and their frequency. Some chick who watched for anomalies in weather patterns. Some other dude who mapped out daily world events and analyzed them for potential Break material. Some other

chick who tracked SQ activity overseas. Other dudes and other chicks who did other things.

Dak kept yawning even though he tried not to — which meant he kept doing that weird contorted face trick. Sera shot him dirty looks about every thirty seconds.

One Hystorian they met stood out from the pack. His name was Riq and he was far younger than everyone else, with dark skin and darker eyes. He was a kid compared to the rest of the geezers in the room.

“Riq is an absolute prodigy when it comes to languages,” Brint said when he introduced him. “He learned five languages by the age of five, and he’s set a goal to pick up one a year since then.”

“You guys are supposed to be smart,” the young man said. “I’m sixteen. You’ve got three seconds to guess how many languages I know. Go.”

“Sixteen,” Sera said, her voice laced with annoyance.

“Wow,” Riq responded. “Stunning. No wonder they chose you for this.”

“They didn’t choose us,” Dak said. “We invented a time-travel device and no one else can make it work. Ever done that before? Invent a time-travel device?”

Riq rattled off something in another language. All Dak knew was that it had a lot of clearing of the throat.

“You need to spit somewhere?” Dak asked him. “Or did you swallow part of your oversized brain?”

“If I did, maybe I *should* spit it out. It’d still be bigger than yours, apparently.”

“Okay,” Brint said as he stepped between them. “Good to see you two hit it off so well. We’ll be coming back to Riq tomorrow for some language-device training.” He mumbled, “That ought to be fun.”

Next they were introduced to Arin, a young woman with thick blond hair. Of all the Hystorians they’d met so far, she seemed the most stressed, clutching a disorderly stack of papers to her chest.

“Arin is in charge of creating a Hystorian’s Guide for each Break,” Brint explained. “She’s been combing through our archives, gathering the information that will be most useful to you in different time periods.”

Arin shook hands with Dak, then Sera. “*Archives* sounds impressive, but what Brint means is that I’ve spent months rummaging through boxes full of mildewed papyrus and crumpled bamboo scrolls. There was one

twentieth-century Hystorian who left behind a numbered collection of soup-can wrappers. I still can't figure out if it's an important cipher or if the poor man was simply a very organized hoarder."

Mari gave Arin a warm smile. "It's been daunting, but Arin's done a marvelous job."

"I thought I'd have more time, that's all," Arin said softly, and then she wished them luck and scurried away.

Dak realized too late that he should have thanked her. By the time he thought of it, they'd already made their way around the room, returning to the platform with the podium.

Brint turned to Dak with a satisfied smile on his face. "Now that we've done that, we want to take you to meet the people going with you on your trip. They're highly trained —"

The sound of an explosion cut off his words. The entire operations center rocked, throwing half of the people to the ground. Dak stumbled into Sera and they crashed into the wall. She wrapped her arms around him to keep both of them from toppling over.

There was a second boom, followed by another jolt to the room. This time Dak and Sera *did* fall — he landed on top of her and heard her grunt despite the ringing in his ears.

Brint and Mari both stumbled over to Dak and Sera and helped get them to their feet. For the moment the explosions had stopped, but the Hystorians were shouting, running around with panicked expressions on their faces. It was mass confusion.

"What's going on?" Dak asked. His heart rate had skyrocketed, and he noticed Sera was holding his hand. He pulled away, embarrassed.

Before anyone could answer his question, the huge monitor that dominated the room went black. When it came back online a moment later, a face filled the screen. It was a woman with flaming red hair and lipstick the color of black oil, her face all hard edges. The room hushed as everyone stared at the screen in horror.

After all was completely silent, the fierce-looking woman spoke.

"You really thought you could hide such a thing from the SQ?" she asked, her voice biting with hate. "We're coming, Brint. We're coming for your precious Infinity Ring."



## A Hastening of Plans

THE LADY IN RED'S announcement was immediately followed by a series of shattering explosions that rattled the operations room and sent ceiling tiles raining from above. Clouds of dust arose where pieces of ceiling hit the floor. Dak cradled the Ring to his chest protectively. That nasty woman had threatened to come take it from him, and no way would he ever let that happen.

“Come on,” Brint said tightly, throwing a worried glance at Mari. “We don’t have any time to mess around.”

He grabbed Dak by the arm and escorted him roughly up the aisle that rounded the room. Mari and Sera were right behind them — Dak noticed that Mari had retrieved the SQuare, and was hurriedly placing it back into her satchel. Brint came to a panel in the wall and pushed. The whole thing pivoted open. The four of them slipped through into a hidden room that was only about eight feet across and completely empty. Dak turned to see Riq follow them inside, then Brint shut the panel.

“Language is going to be your biggest barrier,” Mari said. “We need to get that taken care of before we can send you off. We just have to hope our defenses hold until we can get you to the insertion team.”



Dak tried not to show how terrified he was. “What’s going on anyway? Who was that woman?”

“We call her the Lady in Red,” Brint answered. “Her name is Tilda. You’ll never meet a viler, more hateful woman. I don’t think she cares one whit about anything except amassing power and moving up the ranks. She won’t be happy until she’s the leader of the SQ. And she’s convinced that wiping out the Hystorians is the best way to make that happen.”

“Riq, quickly,” Mari ordered. “Tell them about the devices.”

The teenager seemed to have lost some of his arrogance from before. *Nothing like an invasion from an evil red-haired lady to shake you up a bit,* Dak mused.

Riq pulled out several small objects from a plastic cylinder he’d had in his shirt pocket. He held up a couple of them — one looked like a headphone bud, and the other a tooth.

“What the heck are those?” Dak asked.

“While your parents spent their whole lives playing around with time travel,” the young man answered, “mine worked on language-translation equipment. And this is so beyond what the rest of the world knows, you won’t even believe it works.”

He stepped forward and leaned toward Dak, holding out the earpiece. Dak instinctively took a step backward.

“Hey, quit being a baby,” Riq said. “Come here!”

Dak had to push down his rising anger. “Fine.”

He let Riq reach up and put the tiny device in his ear, shoving it down until it almost hurt. Then he put a second one in Dak’s other ear.

“All right, this is the part you won’t like,” Riq said.

Another explosion rocked the building, sending all of them teetering for a few seconds as the room shook. When the place stilled again, Dak glared at Riq warily.

“Don’t worry,” the teenager said. “It’ll only hurt for a few seconds.”

Dak was determined not to show any more fear. “Okay, what do I do?”

“Open your mouth. Open wide.”

Dak shot a questioning glance at Sera, who looked on impatiently, then did as he was told. Riq leaned forward and stuck his fingers in Dak’s mouth. Dak gagged — it was maybe the least pleasant part of a very unpleasant day. There was an uncomfortable *click* that he couldn’t tell if

he'd heard or felt. Then a burst of pain shot through his body, and he jumped back from Riq — who was actually smiling.

But the pain went away quickly, just as had been promised.

“So what is —”

Riq cut him off. “No time to explain. You’ll find out soon enough, when you’re able to talk to people in different languages. It’ll take some time to get used to, but you’ll be fine after some practice.”

Riq did the same thing to Sera, who stood still and didn’t complain a lick. When Riq was finished, he stepped back and nodded to Mari.

A thunderous boom sounded, and this time Dak and the others fell to the floor. They scrambled to their feet as muffled shouts rang out from the other side of the secret panel.

“The SQ is in the HOC!” Mari yelled.

“We can’t waste another second!” Brint shouted at Dak and Sera. “Get the Ring ready! You have to go now — hurry, before they storm in here and take it!”

Mari seized Brint by the arm. “Brint, we have to wait for the insertion team. They’re just kids!”

“There’s no time. For all we know, our team is dead.”

Dak swallowed, the reality of it all hitting him hard and heavy now. “Where do we go?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Brint answered. “Just away from here. I’ll come with you.”

Mari clearly didn’t like it. “Riq can go, too. You’ll need all the help you can get.”

“Now hold on —” Riq said.

“But —” Dak began.

“No more buts! We *do not* have a choice!”

The woman pulled the satchel off of her shoulder and handed it to Sera. “Guard that with your life. You can’t do anything if you lose the Square! If for some reason you do, you’ll have to travel back here and get a new one. But that might get messy — there’s no telling what you’d be coming back to.”

Dak nodded, then moved to stand close to Sera. Riq joined them, looking utterly put out. There were sounds of gunfire now in the other room. Gunfire, and screams.

“You know how to do it, right?” Dak asked Sera, his voice tinged with hysteria.

She simply nodded. He felt a pang of loss again when he handed over the Infinity Ring, as if he were throwing away his parents in some way.

Sera immediately set to work on the programming function of the Ring. Her face was a mask of concentration.

More shots rang out on the other side of the wall. A woman screamed, a sound of pain and terror. Dak felt utterly useless, knowing that if he tried to help Sera he’d only get in the way, slow her down. So he braced himself and waited for the next terrible thing to happen.

It only took about ten seconds.

The secret panel tore from its hinges and flew through the air, windmilling until it smacked into Brint. He cried out and crumpled to the ground as Mari dove for cover. Dak looked back at the now-open passage to the HOC. Two men in soldier’s gear stood there with guns raised, a red beam blazing out from each of their scopes.

“Get on the ground!” one of them yelled. “Now!”

Dak dropped, bringing his arms up to cover his head — like that’d do any good if one of these thugs decided to shoot a bullet in his direction. Sera cowered in the corner, working on the Infinity Ring nestled in her lap, hidden from plain view. Riq crouched right next to her.

“How *dare* you come onto our property like this!” Mari shouted. “We’ll report this to every media —”

She wasn’t able to finish before one of the men struck her with the butt of his weapon. She cried out and fell next to Brint, who lay still where he’d dropped.

A rage roared inside Dak — a fury that he never knew was possible all those years he’d spent reading in his room. That already seemed a lifetime ago. He charged the soldier who’d hurt Mari. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he dove and tackled the man, knocking him off balance. The second man was on Dak in an instant, dragging him by the hair across the floor while he kicked out with his feet and wailed from the pain.

The man dumped him into a heap. “One more move or remark that I don’t like, and someone gets shot. Do you understand me? Now where’s the Ring?” Dak saw in horror that the soldier had finally noticed that Sera was

not just sitting there, but busy working on something. “Hey! What’re you doing?”

Sera looked back at him, her face lit with fear. “Nothing. I’m just scared.”

“You think I’m stupid? Hand it over!” the man yelled. “I won’t ask again.”

Sera had turned her attention back to the device. “Okay, just one second.”

“Now, you little brat!”

He moved toward Sera, and Dak scrambled to get in front of him. He landed in Sera’s lap just as Riq reached over and placed his hand on her shoulder. There was a *click* and a *beep*. The world collapsed into light and sound and they were sucked away from Hystorian headquarters.



## Far, Far Away

SERA RELISHED the escape. The ordeal through the wormhole lasted just a few seconds, the same mind-jolt of movement and streaking turns of light and darkness, the same feeling that her atoms were about to shake loose. And then it was over without transition, that instant shift to stillness and normalcy as if nothing had happened at all. She looked around her.

She was at the foot of a giant pyramid, its huge blocks of yellow stone angling away toward the sky so that she couldn't even see its apex far above. The ground was dry and dusty, the air around them sweltering hot. She sat in the same position as she had in the hidden room outside the operations center, and the Infinity Ring rested in her sweaty hands. Dak was still sprawled across her lap but quickly scooted away to lie on the ground to her right, his head resting against a block at the bottom of the pyramid.

And Riq was standing just over her shoulder, peering up at the huge structure with such a blank expression that he could have been a wax statue.

"It's . . ." she started to say. "Do you think they're okay?"

His dazed eyes finally met hers. "Brint and Mari can take care of themselves. And I'd rather not let them down, so we've got a lot to do. No time to mess around."

Dak had sat up straight with his back against the stone. “Great. They sent the most annoying person in that whole operations room with us. Just great.”

“Dak,” Riq retorted, “be glad you’re a little kid or I’d break your nose about five times to make myself feel better. You think I *want* to be here?”

Dak glared but kept quiet.

“Sorry,” the older boy muttered. He walked away, went over to sit on a rock that jutted from the sand. “I just wasn’t ready for this. There are people back there . . . I may never see again.”

Sera sighed. The shock of everything had almost overwhelmed the fact that they were sitting at the foot of an actual Egyptian pyramid. And the blocks of stone looked much newer than she would’ve imagined, which meant they’d come far into the past, just as she’d hoped. She wanted to be as distant from the SQ as possible, both in time and geography. She looked at the imposing structure, knowing she should be more impressed, but her eagerness to get on with things outweighed all else.

She stood up and slapped the dust from her pants. She grabbed the Infinity Ring in one hand and took the satchel from Dak, then held both items out in front of her.

“Hey, look at me,” she said. “We need to start using these things the way they were meant to be used. If we do what the Hystorians asked, then maybe when we go back the SQ will never have attacked, and we’ll all be living fat and happy.”

“Wait a second,” Dak replied, seeming deep in thought. “If we change history, then maybe we change our future lives, and if there’s no need for Breaks to be corrected, then maybe we never build a time-travel device and the Breaks that didn’t need fixing never get fixed and . . .” He stopped, his expression having changed to complete confusion.

Sera knew what he was getting at. “Better not to even go there. Time paradoxes are way too complicated, and we don’t know for sure how they work. That’s why we can’t risk going back to our own time.”

“We can’t go home again, huh?” Riq asked.

“Not until we’ve done everything Brint’s asked of us. What if we go back home and the Infinity Ring blinks out of existence before we’ve fixed all the Breaks?”

“You could make another one,” Dak said. “Couldn’t you?”

“You’re assuming I wouldn’t blink out of existence, too.”

“That could happen?” Riq asked. He looked deeply troubled by the idea.

“The whole point is that I don’t know! Look.” She put the Ring in the satchel and handed it to Dak, then took a stick from the ground, using it to draw a line in the sand. “Time is like a river, right? That’s what *time stream* means. The current is flowing in one direction — toward the future — and we’re all being pulled along for the ride. The Ring, of course, lets us move upstream or downstream at will.”

“Oh, goody,” said Riq. “A metaphor. They didn’t tell me you were a poet, too.”

“Here’s a poem,” said Dak. “Roses are red, violets are blue. Please just shut up, why don’t you?”

“I’ve got the speaking stick.” Sera raised the stick. “And it doubles as a hitting stick, so *both* of you be quiet.”

“Time. River. Got it,” said Dak.

“Now imagine the Breaks as great big boulders that have been plopped into the time stream. The stream keeps flowing, but it has to veer a little bit from its natural course, working its way around the boulders. It’s not a completely different river — it still gets where it was going, for the most part — but there are subtle changes all along its length. Ripples. Remnants.”

“And as we remove the boulders,” Riq added, “the river goes back to normal.”

“Right, but we can’t say for sure what ‘normal’ looks like. As long as we’re moving from place to place with the Infinity Ring, we’re anomalies, and we’re immune to the changes we’re causing. But when we return to our proper time . . . who knows.”

“So, we won’t be affected?” Dak asked. “Our memories will stay intact? And the Ring, too?”

“That’s the theory, Dak. I’m sorry, but this is all uncharted territory here. All I know for sure is that the second we start changing things, the time line will be in flux and we won’t be able to take anything for granted. All we can do is make the changes the Hystorians tell us to and hope for the best. Otherwise we might go back to discover the planet is a chunk of dead rock floating through space.”

Riq moved closer and eyed the satchel in Dak's hands. "Okay, fine. So how in the world do we know what to do? They didn't tell me anything about the Breaks, their locations, nothing. I started my training in The Art of Memory, but hadn't gotten too far."

"Then it's a good thing two out of three of us are smart," Dak said, stepping up beside Riq. "We'll figure it out. You just be a good boy and translate."

Riq laughed, which made Dak's face grow red. "How many languages do you know, by the way? I forgot."

"One," Dak said in a deadpan voice.

"Ah, okay. When I need help with English, I'll come to you."

"And when I need help on how to look stupider, I'll come to you."

Riq pointed a finger at Dak's ear. "Just remember, as impressive as that device is, it won't help you with reading and writing. You're basically illiterate now. Just sayin'."

Sera cleared her throat. Dak was usually so quick to trust strangers. She wondered if Riq reminded Dak a little too much of himself. "You guys finished?" she asked. They each gave the other a dirty look, but then nodded at her. "For the love of mincemeat. Dak, you can't be dumb and learn tons of languages. And, Riq, you better be nice to my best friend — he knows more about history than your bosses. I guarantee it." She waited a moment to make sure she'd put their argument to rest, then took a deep breath. "Dak, there's something else. I've been thinking about your parents, and I think they're anomalies, too."

Dak got serious, fast. "What does that mean?"

"They warped out with us, but they didn't warp back in. That means they were lost in transit. Without the Ring to steer them, they'll be completely unanchored, hopping through the time stream like skipping stones. But I don't think their movements will be entirely random. As untethered anomalies, they should theoretically be drawn to other anomalies in the time stream."

"Theoretically?" Dak echoed. "I'm getting so tired of that word!"

"What I mean to say is that I think they'll be drawn to the Breaks. Which means, as big a place as time is, there's a very real chance we'll encounter them in the course of our mission."



Dak took a moment to consider what she'd said. Then he held out the satchel. "Let's get on with it, then."

Sera couldn't have agreed more. She sat down, pulled the SQuare out of the satchel, and turned it on. Dak and Riq crowded around her to see what appeared on the screen. There were just two sentences, white letters on a black background, with an input box below them:

You have one chance to type password.  
Fail, and device will explode.



## Finger Tapping

“YOU’RE KIDDING me,” Sera said. “All of that talking, and they forgot to give us the *password*?”

Dak had felt a little quiver in his gut, too. Here they were in ancient Egypt — he took yet another look at the Great Pyramid of Giza, still in disbelief that he was standing at the foot of something he’d dreamed about seeing for years — with nothing to guide them on what to do next except a Square device that was locked to them. But, man, the air smelled clean and fresh, like it hadn’t been tainted by a few thousand years of humans doing what they do. Everything *looked* sharper, too. He couldn’t help feeling optimistic.

“We’ll just have to take a guess,” Dak said. “Maybe it’s *Hystorian*.”

Riq scoffed. “Yeah, why don’t you go ahead and type that in. Give it a whirl. If it blows up, oh well!”

Dak would’ve loved to punch the guy right in the stomach — if only there wouldn’t be consequences, like, for example, getting beaten up in retaliation. “I didn’t mean to just go ahead and do it, moron. I was throwing out ideas — maybe you should try to actually contribute something.”

“I’m about to smack the both of you,” Sera said evenly, and her hardened face showed she meant it. “You two haven’t even known each other long enough to be enemies. Cut it out.”

“Seems plenty long enough to me,” Dak grumbled.

“I mean it,” Sera snapped. She returned her attention to the screen. “The more I think about it, the harder it is to believe they would’ve sent us away with this if we couldn’t find a way to figure out the password. We just need to think about it for a while. Once we agree on something, all we can do is try it.”

“But it has to be logical,” Riq said. “We can’t take any wild guesses.” He didn’t look at Dak when he said it, but Dak knew it was a jab at him.

Sera turned the device off and folded her hands on top of it. “All right then. Let’s all *think*. No talking for a few minutes.”

Dak pressed his back against the bottom of the pyramid — *Seriously*, he thought, *how cool is this?* — and put his head in his hands, closing his eyes. He’d memorized the two sentences and ran through them in his mind. Thinking back to their short time at the Hystorian headquarters, he tried to remember if either Brint or Mari might’ve said something that could’ve been a clue to the password. But nothing came to mind.

Frustrated, he wondered if maybe the message on the Square itself was a clue. He pictured the words in his mind. *You have one chance to type password. Fail, and device will explode.*

“I think I might know what we need to do,” Riq said. “It has to be related to explosives somehow. Bombs. Fail-safes. Bombs have fail-safes, right? A way to make sure they don’t explode?”

“Um” was all Sera got out. “I doubt any of us are experts on that.”

“Well,” Riq replied, “maybe we can hike our way to a local village and ask someone around here about it. Get them to help us figure it out.”

Dak was astounded. “*You’re* a Hystorian? You really think people in ancient Egypt had bombs? Especially electronic bombs with fail-safes built into the device?”

Riq looked up at the pyramid. “Well . . . no, I suppose not. Got any better ideas?”

Dak went back to brooding with the others. He closed his eyes again to block everything out. Then it hit him, fast and hard. “I’ve got it!” he yelled, standing up.

Sera and Riq jumped at his sudden exclamation, and Dak relished the briefest hint of wounded pride that flashed across his new rival's face.

"What?" Sera asked. "Spit it out!"

"We're thinking too much," Dak said. "Just like anyone else would. But because we know absolutely nothing about this, there's no way they'd let us risk destroying the thing by guessing at passwords. So they told us what to do, right in front of our eyes!"

He saw a flicker of understanding in the others, and he hurried to spit out the solution before either of them could claim they'd figured it out, too. "Password. We need to type that word. *Password*. That's it."

Sera and Riq exchanged doubtful looks.

"What else could it possibly be?" Dak asked them.

"That's really risky," Sera finally said. "What if it's wrong?"

"Duh!" Dak threw up his hands in frustration. "What if any word we come up with is wrong? Got any better ideas? It seems obvious to me."

"I think he's right," Riq said — which irritated Dak slightly, because it made it harder to hate the guy. "If we only have one chance, it would have to be something that stands out once you see it. And that does. Plain and simple."

Sera slowly nodded while biting her lower lip. "I guess I'm just scared to death to actually try anything. We only have one shot."

Dak shrugged. "That's why *you* should type it in. Go for it."

"Why not you?"

"Because I'm the history expert. They need me. Badly."

"I think you mean history *nerd*," Riq muttered under his breath.

"Well, technically you're right," Dak said. "As any real language expert should know, the origin of the word dates back to the mid twentieth cent —"

"Maybe later," Sera interrupted. "As engaging as that sounds, let's focus on this right now."

"Okay," Dak said. "Hand it over, I'll do it." He had a burst of confidence that he was right about what to input. Taking the device from Sera, he took a seat and turned it on. The same two sentences popped up on the screen. He drew in a breath, tapped the box, typed out "Password" on the virtual keyboard, then clicked the OK button.

The screen instantly flashed white, and for about half a second Dak thought it was the beginning of a massive explosion that would incinerate him. But then words started to appear.

Break #1

Sally forth, astute and wise  
Search the page, find the prize  
Centuries pass, mind and heart  
Devoted to the Memory's Art

Dak smiled. "What did I tell you? I solved it with my eyes closed."

But his victory was short-lived. Below the poem was the most confusing image Dak had ever seen, a hodgepodge of circles and broken lines and shapes. There were Greek letters on one side of the image, and the word "lagoon" on the other.



"What the heck is *that*?" he asked.

"Spain," Riq whispered. "We need to go to Spain."



## Bye-bye, Pyramid

“HUH?” SERA asked. “What hat did you pull *that* out of?”

Dak had just been about to ask the same thing. Nothing in the weird picture seemed to suggest Spain. Or anything else for that matter.

Riq was obviously trying to hide a satisfied smile — but not too hard. It sneaked its way across his face. “They gave us something easy to start with. I could’ve done this one after just a couple of lessons.”

“Lessons in what?” Dak asked.

“I told you before — The Art of Memory.”

Sera was nodding. “They mentioned that to us, but didn’t say much about it.”

“It’s an image-based memory trick.” Riq pointed to the screen. “It’s been scrambled up beyond recognition, but if you imagine rotating the pieces around, you can see it’s the Spanish coat of arms.”

Dak leaned in for a closer look. If he squinted, he could almost make it out. “Spain, huh?”

“Not just Spain,” Riq said. “But a city and date, too. The Greek letters actually stand in for numbers — a common practice. And *lagoon* in Latin is *palus*. We need to go to Palos de la Frontera on August 3, 1492.”

Dak recognized the time and place. There was only one possible explanation for why they'd need to go there.

"Hey, you in there?"

Dak blinked — Sera was snapping her fingers under his nose. "Sorry, just accessing the genius shelf in my brain. I know what we need to do."

Sera's eyebrows rose, and even Riq looked intrigued.

"There's an obvious candidate for a Break, something that ends up affecting the entire world for centuries, all the way up to now. Or then. Or when it used to be our now. You get me?"

"Yeah, we get you." She rolled her eyes a bit. "So what is it?"

"That's where the ships leave that'll eventually discover the Americas. The *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*. The voyage of the Amancio brothers!"

"Good. Let's get there, then we can see what else the SQuare has for us," Sera said.

"Works for me," Riq said.

Dak felt like leaping in the air and kicking his feet together — he was so excited. But he figured he better act like the mature save-the-world man he'd become, so he simply nodded and said, "Let's get her done."

Sera shoved the SQuare into the satchel then pulled out the Infinity Ring. As she fiddled with the programming, Dak moved his gaze to the Great Pyramid towering above them, slanting up and away as if it went all the way to the sky. He thought of the thousands of people who'd worked on it, performing superhuman feats with massive stones that would've been difficult to move into place even with modern technology.

"You know," he said, that comforting and familiar urge to share his great knowledge warming him from top to bottom. "Funny story about the Egyptians. When the royals died, it was very important to prepare the bodies so that they could last forever, mummify them until they were ready to rise up as gods in these humongous tombs. One thing they did was take their *brains* out, *through* their nose. Now that's one big booger. The way they did it was —"

"Dak!" Sera yelled. She smiled when he looked back down at her. "That's so . . . *vastly* entertaining, but . . ." She held up the Infinity Ring.

"Time to go?"

"Time to go."

They gathered around her and touched the Ring. She pushed the button and the Pyramid was yanked away in an explosion of light.





## Clothes and a Poem

SERA WAS on her back. She opened her eyes to see a perfect blue sky, only a few wisps of clouds flecked across its surface. A warm breeze blew up and over her body, along with the sounds of crashing waves. She sat up to see a stunningly beautiful ocean, the water blue and dark and choppy with whitecaps, several old-timey sailing vessels out on the horizon.

“Wow,” she said, gripping the cool metal of the Infinity Ring in her lap. “That’s awesome. The waves are a lot bigger here than at the beach where we go with your mom and dad.”

“That’s because we go to a bay,” Dak answered from her left. He sounded bitter, and she wondered if mentioning his parents had been a bad idea.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.” She slipped the Ring back into the satchel.

Riq was sitting cross-legged to her right. “Did everything come through okay? The SQuare? The Ring?”

Sera pulled out the SQuare and inspected it. “They look fine.”

He gave a satisfied nod then turned to look behind them. Sera did so as well. Several small wooden buildings sat a few hundred feet away, and

behind them an entire village. People milled about, but it didn't seem like anyone had noticed the visitors from the future yet.

Sera got on her feet and brushed the sand from her pants. Looking at them made her think of how much they would stand out. "First thing we need to do is find some new clothes."

Dak was already pointing at a small house on the beach. "Look, they've got a bunch of laundry hung out to dry. Perfect!"

"That's called *stealing*," Sera chided.

"Are you kidding me? Small price to pay for saving the world from destruction and mayhem. They'll have great grandkids who'll thank us. Come on."

"Now wait just one second," Riq scoffed. "I'm not going to run around following two little squirts excited to dress up and play history together. This is serious business, and we need to think things through."

Sera didn't want a long argument. She knew Dak had a point about the clothes, but figured saying so wasn't the way to get Riq on board. "You're probably right," she said. "Maybe we shouldn't worry about the clothes. Let's just hang out for a while. Talk it over and hope no one spots us."

Riq looked at her suspiciously. "Well . . . when you put it that way . . . I think we should probably grab those clothes after all. But just don't do anything stupid!"

He took off in that direction, slipping and sliding in the sand, and Dak was right on his heels. Letting out a sigh, Sera went after them.



A half hour later, Sera, Dak, and Riq were crouched behind an old barrel in an alley on the outskirts of the village. They'd stealthily made their way up from the house on the beach. Some of their newfound clothes — thieves, all three of them! — were too small, some too big. But they'd found just enough to get by. The boys wore linen shirts covered by buttoned jackets that Dak called doublets, with breeches and hose that looked ridiculous to Sera. But not as bad as the twill housedress she had to wear — completely impractical and bulky.

Dak wore a hat as well — low crowned with a wide bill — and kept straightening it, breaking into a smile every time. She knew that he was

living a fantasy he would've never thought possible just a few days ago. Literally living history. She wished she could be just as excited — but all that occupied her mind was stress and worry.

“Time to check the SQuare for a hint, don't you think?” Dak said after they'd spent a minute or two spying on the people walking through the streets ahead of them. “If we don't find a Hystorian for help, we're sunk.”

“That's punny,” Riq whispered.

“Huh?” Dak responded.

“Never mind.”

Sera turned and sat down on the ground, then pulled out the SQuare. She flicked it on and the strange diagram — the Art of Memory puzzle — had been replaced by a short menu:

Access Granted

The First Break - Menu

Daily Journal of Activity

Hystorian's Guide

Identify Break

Locate a Hystorian

Proceed to Second Break

“Seems simple enough,” Sera said. “Dak, you're the history nerd in this group, so you'll be in charge of keeping the journal. Just think, if we make all of this happen, you'll be one of the most famous Hystorians ever.”

Instead of coming back with a smart aleck remark, he smiled proudly. “That sounds like a job I can handle. But it makes me a little sad to think we're changing the thing I love so much.”

“We'll just be making it better. Right?”

Dak nodded, though he didn't appear so sure.

Sera tapped the screen and frowned. “Wait. Something's wrong.”

“What is it?” Riq asked. Dak seemed to be daydreaming about his potential role in history.

“I clicked on the 'Identify Break' option, and look what happened.”

Data Corrupted

Return to previous menu?

“That’s not good,” said Riq.

“When the SQ attacked,” Sera said, “everything went crazy, and Mari had to yank this thing right off of the main computer. What if she was uploading data? And what if the upload was incomplete?”

“Then we might be in trouble,” said Riq.

“Relax,” said Dak. “We know it’s got to have something to do with the Amancios. We can work it out.”

“Try something else,” suggested Riq.

Sera went back to the menu and tapped on “Locate a Hystorian” as Dak and Riq leaned in to see over her shoulder. A short message appeared, and Sera let out a sigh of relief.

If you’ve solved the puzzle to arrive here,  
in both time and place, the following riddle  
will help you find the person you need. If  
you’ve made a mistake and have gone somewhere  
else, then you are royally bunked. Good luck.

Sera had just finished reading it when the words faded away and were replaced with a poem:

A wee little bee flies through the sky  
It stings your nose and makes you cry  
And run on a road till it comes to a tee  
Looks out at the bright and brilliant sea  
It’s her, you scream, the way it ends  
That’s how you must find your friend

“Hmm,” Sera said. The other two made similar sounds as they all stared at the six lines of the poem. Dak even went so far as to scratch his chin, purse his lips, and widen his eyes — he looked like a mad scientist.

“Any ideas?” Riq asked.

“I’ve got a few,” Dak replied, still not losing the comical expression. “Studying the Renaissance era was a hobby of mine for a few months back when I was six. I’m sure that’ll come into play here.”

Sera had to repress a groan — of course, she had no room to talk. She’d first discovered her love of quantum physics when she was four.

She’d also been raised speaking Spanish at home, but she was worried about Dak’s ability to interact with the local Hystorian when the time came. “What do we do about these translation devices in our mouths and ears?”

Riq gave a slight shrug. “Well, it would’ve been nice to train you on them for a while, but they’re not that hard. They’re linked together by radio frequency, and the earpiece can judge almost instantly what language it’s hearing. It’ll translate for you automatically, and trigger the tooth device to alter your words as they come out of your mouth — which means that in each new setting, you want to let someone else speak before you do. The speaking part’s a little tricky; it takes some practice to know how slowly to speak and when to pause, that sort of thing. But the translation of what others are saying — that works like a charm. Maybe let me do the talking as much as possible until you get the hang —”

“Well hello!” someone barked from behind them, cutting Riq off.

Sera turned her head to see an enormous man with a dark beard. He held a long iron bar in one fist, bouncing it in the palm of his other hand. Sera’s heart froze.

The giant took a few steps forward, then leaned down to sneer at them.

“I never thought I’d see it,” he said with creepy awe. “Visitors from the future.”



## One-sided Conversation

DAK JUMPED to his feet, dragging Sera to hers as well. Riq stood right beside them as the man took another step closer. He could now reach them if he decided to swing that big iron rod in his hands. And probably not for just a love tap, either.

“Who are you?” Riq asked.

“Who am *I*?” the man responded gruffly. His lips didn’t move in sync with the words Dak was hearing, which meant the translator device was actually working. Even in the face of certain death by a barbarian, that was pretty cool. “Three little urchins show up in the streets of my town, dressed in ill-fitting clothes, looking as out of place as an anvil in a cooper’s shop, and you ask who *I* am?”

There was a long moment of silence before Sera said, timidly, “Yes?”

The man let one end of his rod fall to the ground and he leaned on it like a cane. Then he laughed, a deep bellow of a noise that almost made Dak look up to see if it was going to rain.

“We can explain everything,” Sera said. “It’s not what you think.”

“Not what I think!” the man roared. “I just said you were from the future and you didn’t bat an eye or protest! That something you think

people go around talking about?”

Dak reached out and pulled on Sera’s hair. Talking to this guy was craziness — they needed to run. She looked at him sharply then returned her glare to the stranger.

“I’ll tell you who I am,” he said. “I was trained by my father, who was trained by his mother, who was trained by her father, who was trained by his mother. From there it goes three mothers in a row and then a string of fathers. Way, way back is my point.”

“Trained to do what?” Dak asked.

“To look for the likes of you, that’s what. I’m a Time Warden of the SQ, raised to the Watch when I was only fourteen. But if I’d known the people we’ve been looking for all these centuries were nothing but a few weaned babies, I’d have left the honor to my little sis. Who has one arm. And no legs.”

That pricked Dak’s pride. “Well, if it’s any consolation, we were hoping you’d be shorter,” he grumbled.

“Why are you here?” the Warden asked. “What do you know?”

Sera opened her mouth then closed it. She seemed to be considering reasoning with the giant.

“Look,” she said at last, “we know who you work for. They don’t care about anybody but themselves. We *are* from the future and, trust me, they make a mess of everything.”

“Who cares about the future?” the man rumbled. “They’re paying me well *now*.”

“We can pay you!” Dak exclaimed. “Do you accept, um, currency from a country that hasn’t been established yet?”

“What I want from you is your reason for coming here. What are you planning?”

If only they *had* a plan. But that reminded Dak: They did have the riddle. He was confident he could work it out, and that would mean they’d have an ally in the village. But he needed to buy some time. And some distance would be nice, too.

“Speak!” the man shouted. “Speak or I’ll start breaking faces with my toy!”

“Okay, okay,” Dak said. He felt a funny flutter in his mouth when he spoke and something like a double-echo in his ears. His translation tool

would need some practice if the goal was to fit in — assuming they survived the next five minutes. “We can tell you everything you need to know.”

“You sound funny, boy.”

“Dak, what’re you doing?” Sera whispered fiercely to him.

He just winked at her in response. Then he stepped forward so that he was directly beneath the angry glare of their visitor. He held his hands up. “I’m using a translation device, so if I sound funny, it’s his fault.” He jabbed a thumb back at Riq. “You’re right — we did come from the future, and we came in a very complicated travel machine. It’s hidden under the sand out on the beach. We’ll take you there if you promise not to hurt us.”

“And we have laser guns,” Riq blurted out. “Touch us and we’ll zap you. Zap you to death!”

Dak spun to give him a hard glare. “Um . . . yeah, those. Very dangerous.” He turned back to the Time Warden. “So the time machine’s that way.”

The man’s face hadn’t so much as twitched during the exchange. “Time machine? Laser guns? What is this nonsense?”

“We’re from the future,” Dak responded. “What do you think we did, snapped our fingers and *poof*? Time is a river; we came in a boat. It’s that way.”

When the man finally let down his guard and turned to look in the direction Dak had indicated, Dak went for it. He lurched forward and slammed his shoulder into the Time Warden’s side, knocking him off balance as the iron bar rattled to the ground. Then Dak pushed him again, and the man toppled over.

As the Warden roared in rage and scrambled to get up, Dak grabbed Sera and Riq by the hands and yanked them in the opposite direction. Without looking back, the three of them sprinted away and around the nearest corner, into the busy streets of Palos de la Frontera.





## A Pile of Boxes

SERA COULD hear the shouts of the Time Warden behind them like the rumble of thunder as they ran, causing all the people bustling about to stop and stare at the commotion. Sera and the others pushed and dodged and zigzagged their way through the crowd. There were men and women, many of them carrying baskets or sacks. Carts and animals, children chasing one another, sellers hawking their wares. She kept one eye on Dak, hoping he had some kind of plan — besides “run!” — in that precious brain of his.

They passed a shop with cuts of meats displayed in the windows and approached a tavern, where a large group of people had just exited, filling the street. They’d just started shoving their way into the mass of people when Riq was suddenly lifted off his feet and backward. He shrieked in surprise, and Sera spun to see what had happened. The huge bearded man had caught up to them, had grabbed Riq by the back collar. He slammed the teenager to the ground and lifted a fist to punch him.

Sera snapped. She screamed and jumped on the man, wrapping one arm around his neck. He threw her off and into a pack of people. They broke her fall, put her back on her feet. She looked just in time to see Riq, still on his

back, kick out with a foot, slamming the man in the shin. A roar escaped his lips.

A second later, Dak charged in, ramming once again into the Warden's side with the knob of his shoulder. The man tumbled to the ground as Dak helped Riq back to his feet.

"Make way!" Sera yelled, pushing a path through the crowd. The three of them sliced their way through, leaving their stunned enemy to regain his wits. They broke free from the throng and picked up speed once they were in the open. Angry shouts from the Time Warden rose up behind them as Dak took the lead again.

After a minute of hard running, he rounded a large cart and horse then ducked to the right, in between two high walls that separated a tannery and a cooper's shop. Riq and Sera followed — Sera was terrified they were letting themselves get trapped, but there wasn't any time — or breath — to argue. They reached the end of the long, narrow alley and entered a backstreet, bordered by a filthy stream. Dak found a stack of abandoned wooden boxes, then slipped behind them. Sera squeezed in next to him, and Riq did the same.

No one said a word — all of them trying desperately to quiet their heavy breathing. The Time Warden couldn't have been too far behind, so if he'd noticed where they'd gone, he'd be on them within a minute.

Two passed. Three. Four or five. As the time stretched on, a calmness settled over Sera. Maybe they were safe. Maybe they'd lost him.

"We did it," she whispered.

Dak gave her a worried smile. "Yeah, but now we know he'll be looking for us. It really stinks that we can't walk around the village and enjoy the sights a little."

She blinked at him. "Are you serious? That's your biggest concern right now?"

"Hey, we might see my parents, too! You said they'd be drawn to the Breaks. What if they're here?"

Riq cut in. "Our biggest worry is solving that riddle and finding a Hystorian. If we can't do that, what does it matter?"

"Well," Dak said. "Who's got an idea?"

"I think we should go to the local beekeeper," Riq offered. "Seems pretty obvious to me."

“The beekeeper?” Dak scoffed. Then he was off. “Okay, okay. Sometimes it pains me to have to explain such obvious stuff to people, but at least you were smart enough to know that beekeeping was a big deal in those — in *these* — days. Without the development of sugarcane, they needed the honey — plus the beeswax was vital for the candle-making industry.”

“Right,” Riq said, his voice full of annoyance. “I figured as much. So why are you talking to me like I’m an idiot?”

Dak looked flabbergasted. “*Because*. Hello? Towns and cities didn’t have beekeepers! That was all done in the abbeys and monasteries, nowhere near a place like this. Good grief.”

“Well, aren’t I just the dumbest person who ever lived?” Riq asked.

“Do you really want me to answer?” Dak said.

“You guys, seriously,” said Sera. “For the love of mince —”

Just then something clicked. Like a lock falling into place inside Sera’s mind. The words of the poem clarified in her thoughts. “Don’t worry,” she said, trying to hide the rush of excitement. “I got it. I know the answer.”

“What?” Dak asked. “You do? How? Who is it? Where?”

Sera grinned. “Our Hystorian is a butcher.”



The poem had no real meaning — it had just been trying to spell out a word. “Bee” in the first line. “You” in the second. Then “tee” and “sea.” BUTC. And finally it said that it ended with “her.” BUTCHER.

It took a while to explain, but in the end Sera just hushed their questions. If she was wrong, they’d keep looking. For now their problem was making it to the butcher without being spotted by the Time Warden.

“I’ll take the lead this time,” she said. She realized she was clutching the satchel at her side in a tight fist, as if someone might snatch it away if she didn’t. “You two keep a lookout while I decide which way we should go.”

“Okay,” Dak whispered back. “But if you get us killed, I’m gonna kill you.”

“Deal.”

She poked her head out and peered around. Down the little lane there were a few kids throwing garbage into the stream, but no one else was in sight. She remembered that the butcher's shop was right next to the tavern and inn they'd seen, and if her sense of direction was right, they could make it most of the way there without returning to the main thoroughfare. She slipped out of their hiding spot and started running, crouching down as she did so. She could hear the soft footsteps of her friends behind her.

She came to another alley that led back to the main street. Coming to a stop with her shoulder pressed against the rough wood, she slowly leaned forward and took a peek. Other than people going this way and that on the far side, she saw nothing but a couple of stray chickens pecking at old bread.

"All clear," she whispered before taking off again.

They repeated that process three more times before coming to the end of the lane. They had no choice now but to walk through the alley to their right and enter the main thoroughfare of the village again. Sera's heart picked up just at the thought of it. The Time Warden was probably roaming the street, bouncing his menacing iron rod on his open palm.

She took a step into the alley when Dak grabbed her by the arm.

"What do we do if he sees us?" he asked. "We can't run to the butcher and give the Hystorian away."

"In that case, we'll have to split up," Riq suggested. "He can't follow all of us."

Sera shook her head. "I'd rather blow the Hystorian's cover than get separated. We don't split up for anything, and we don't leave anyone behind. Now let's go."

She jogged lightly down the alleyway and slowed when she approached the end, glancing quickly over her shoulder to make sure Dak and Riq followed close behind. The noises of the main road rose to a pitch — laughter and horse's hooves clapping on the cobblestone and sellers yelling for potential customers. She was just about to peek around the corner when the huge body of the Time Warden suddenly filled her vision — his chest at her eyes and his face towering above.

"Well," he bellowed. "I knew the rats would come out soon —"

There was a loud thumping sound as his head jerked forward — his eyes rolled upward, and then he collapsed into a heap on the ground. A

woman with long brown hair stood directly behind him, a large wooden club gripped in both of her hands. She wore a white apron with bloodstains all over it. Her chest lurched with heavy breaths.

“I knew something was up when I saw this lug chasing people,” she said.

“*You’re* the butcher?” Dak asked, the surprise evident in his voice.

The woman held the club out in front of her as if inspecting it. “Never leave home without one of these — it can knock out people just as well as cows.” She returned her gaze to Sera and the others. “Yes, I’m the butcher. But more importantly for the likes of you, I’m the local Hystorian. My name is Gloria.”



## A Sharp Pair of Scissors

DAK WANTED to ask a million questions as the woman — who wielded her club like a knight wields his sword — led them to her shop. But she shushed him, told him to wait. People along the street gave them odd looks as they walked by, but none that lingered enough for him to worry too much. They reached the place they'd seen earlier, by the inn, and went through the front part — filled with hanging carcasses and wooden tables and lots and lots of knives — into a back room that held a few chairs.

Gloria motioned for them to have a seat, and then she took one herself after hanging her bloody apron on a hook. Dak couldn't help but notice how everything seemed more intense in the past — by the ocean, everything had seemed sharper and fresher, but in this cramped room, dirt was dirtier, smells were smellier.

“So,” she said. “There’s no need to beat around the bush too much. I’ve been trained for this day, but I have to admit I never thought it would come. I’m just going to ask you a simple question, and I want a simple answer. You ready for it?”

Dak nodded, as did the others.

Gloria leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. “Are you from the future?”

“Yes,” Dak said immediately. “We’re from the future.” He had to keep himself from smiling at the very idea.

“Good,” the woman responded. “You look out of sorts, quite honestly, and the man who was chasing you comes from a long line of SQ thugs. I won’t bother with the usual ‘I can’t believe it’ and the ‘you can’t be serious’ mess. I swore my life to this cause, and I’ll accept it now that I’m seeing it.” A broad smile spread across her face.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Dak said, letting his own smile come through now. He could see the kidlike excitement in the woman’s eyes, and he knew she was a true ally.

“What’s it like?” Gloria asked. “The future where you come from?”

Sera and Riq seemed more than happy to let Dak answer. “In some ways it’s amazing. We have airplanes — they’re like ships that fly — and ways to talk to people on the other side of the planet as if they were sitting right next to you. There are huge buildings that are hundreds of spans high. We’ve even sent people to walk on the moon.”

Gloria laughed, obviously thinking that last one a joke. Dak decided not to press it — he thought back to the warning from his parents. Not to step on any bugs in the past.

“But things are getting bad,” he continued. “Lots of earthquakes and hurricanes and other scary stuff. Plus, the SQ is stronger than ever, pretty much ruling the whole world and running it into the ground. Aristotle was right — we need to fix the Breaks.”

Gloria’s look of wonder dropped into a gloomy stare. “Which is why you’re here. And I’m in this city for a reason, so I can guess why you’ve come.”

Dak was curious. “What would your guess be?”

“A little young to be interrogating your elders, no?” She smiled. “I’m sorry, this is just such a . . . *momentous* occasion, I don’t feel quite like myself.”

Dak shrugged. “It’s okay. I’ve never really had a chitchat with someone from 1492, so it’s all good with me.”

“There’s a major voyage planned for this week,” she said.

“Commissioned by Queen Isabella herself, and led by Christopher

Columbus. Does it have something to do with that?”

“Yes!” Dak shouted as he stood up. He quickly recovered and sheepishly sat back down. “Oh, sorry. I get a little excited about this stuff. But yeah, that’s my guess, too. There should be three ships — the *Santa María*, the *Niña*, and the *Pinta*. Their voyage ends up being really important. If history is about to go off course, our best bet is that it’ll have something to do with those ships.”

“Hold on,” said Riq. “Who’s Christopher Columbus? Aren’t we talking about the voyage led by the Amancio brothers?”

“Well, sure. The Amancio brothers — Salvador and Raul — were in charge once they threw Columbus overboard,” Dak answered. “The mutiny can’t be the Break, can it? No way. I’ve always read that Columbus was the bad guy.”

“Maybe the mutiny is *supposed* to happen and we have to help it,” said Sera. “If the SQ prevents the Amancio brothers from discovering America, that could cause all kinds of trouble with the time stream. Gloria, have you ever heard of them?”

“I know of Salvador and Raul. They’re relatively popular in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. Respected. But what on earth is America?” Gloria asked. She’d followed their exchange, her eyes widening with each word.

Dak was only too happy to give her a history lesson. Except, oddly enough, he was telling her about the future. “It’s hard to believe I’m in a time when people don’t know about this. Those ships are going to do a whole lot more than find new trade routes for Spain. They’re going to stumble upon a major continent that will come to be known as the Americas. It’s a whole New World, Gloria. It’s where we come from.”

Gloria considered for a minute. “You think you need to make sure the mutiny happens as it’s supposed to. It’s that simple?”

“Well . . .” Dak said. His enthusiasm dimmed — there was really nothing *simple* about the situation. “I’m not sure how this whole Break business works yet. But we definitely need to get on that boat. It can’t be a coincidence that we were sent to this time and place. That voyage is the key.”

Gloria turned an eye on Sera and said the strangest thing. “Then we’ll need to give you a haircut.”





It turned out there was a reason Gloria had been the Hystorian assigned to the port town of Palos de la Frontera when their suspicions about the SQ's presence there had arisen. She was extremely knowledgeable of the shipping industry and had major contacts with all the fleets. She knew the only way to get Dak, Sera, and Riq on board the ship would be to pass them off as scrub hands. And that meant sticking to a no-girls-allowed policy, which Sera did *not* take very well.

"How can they be so sexist?" she asked as Gloria brought out a very nasty looking pair of silver scissors. "And have you even *given* anyone a haircut before?"

"Sexist?" Gloria repeated. "I don't know what that word means. And the only hair I ever cut is on an animal, right before slicing it wide open. I promise I won't do that last part to you."

"Gee, thanks."

Gloria started snipping away.

Dak watched all of this with a constant urge to snicker. Riq sat by a window, lost in thoughts he didn't care to share with anyone, hopefully looking out for any sign of the Time Warden's burly frame. Gloria had called in a favor to have him thrown into jail, where his story of time-traveling rascals wouldn't win him any friends. But it wouldn't be long before his bosses heard about what had happened and had him sprung. Time was of the essence.

Dak was still confused by the Break business. "We're here to *change* history, right? Maybe we could try to talk to the Amancios somehow before the voyage."

"Not much chance of that," Gloria answered as she cut free a big handful of Sera's hair. "First of all, how would you get to them? Second, even if you did, why would they trust some goofy-looking kid? Mutiny is a very serious offense, and the last thing you want to do is scare them into changing their minds unless you're positive of what needs to happen. You might be doing the SQ's dirty work for them."

Dak churned with indecision.

"Ow!" Sera suddenly shrieked.

“Oops,” Gloria responded. “Sorry — sometimes I forget how long these blades are.”

“So how are you going to get us on the ship?” Dak asked.

The Hystorian eyed him for a second, then went back to her cutting. “I know the man in charge of hiring urchins and thieves to do the dirty work — they always need people at the last minute. And a catch of three strong and able boys will make his day, I promise.”

“I’m hardly a *boy*,” said Riq.

“You’re more of a boy than I am,” said Sera.

“Strong and able?” asked Dak.

For the first time since they’d met her, Gloria looked worried.



## Behind the Bandana

THE SUN was sweltering when Gloria took Sera and the others out a back door and saddled a couple of horses she had tied up in a small stable. She'd prepared satchels with bread and grapes and dressed them in clothes she said belonged to her nephew. She also smudged dirt from a little garden all over their faces and clothes — Dak smiled the whole time, crowing about living history; Riq grumbled and complained about “going native.” Gloria *tsked* at his complaints. She insisted that they needed to look a lot less like nobles, and fast. It was customary that hired hands spent the night before launch on the ship itself, so they had no time to lose.

Sera was a nervous wreck, and it didn't help that she hated what Gloria had done to her — dirt was one thing, but she felt completely naked without that comforting sense of hair on her neck. She still had enough to wear a ponytail, but just barely. Fortunately, men of the period didn't wear their hair *too* short.

“Hey, you make a pretty convincing boy,” Riq said to her after she was all dirtied up. He smiled to soften the blow.

“You don't,” she replied, but gave a smile back.

Dak finally joined Gloria on one horse — after three failed attempts to get up in the saddle and a whole lot of complaining that the bicycle hadn't been invented yet — and Sera sat with Riq on the other. He tried to sit in front but she refused — it was already humiliating enough for her to pretend to be a boy. She'd at least have the satisfaction of taking lead on the stupid animal. Why was she in such a bad mood? Just because of a haircut? She tried to convince herself it wasn't because Dak was raring to go for a sailing adventure with the famous Amancio brothers and didn't seem scared one bit.

Once they were all mounted up, Gloria turned her horse to face Sera's. "I know an out-of-the-way path that'll get us to the port house where we should find my friend, Stonebull. I'm not expecting any trouble, but if we cross paths with that Time Warden or any of his friends, there'd be no point in fighting. These horses are swift, and we'll have to rely on their legs to save us. If we can reach Stonebull, we'll tell him that the Warden is just someone you stole food from and who wants revenge. He won't care a bit about that — he'll simply be happy to have a few extra hands to replace those who inevitably chicken out on the last day."

"We'll be lucky if *Dak* doesn't chicken out," Riq murmured from behind Sera.

Dak heard it. "We'll be lucky if they don't have the ugly police inspecting anyone who tries to come on the ship."

"Why?" Riq responded. "Then you'd have an excuse not to go."

Dak didn't miss a beat. "Yeah, I know — they only allow ugly people on these voyages. Duh."

"Are you two finished?" Gloria asked. The woman seemed completely bewildered by their behavior.

Neither of them acknowledged her, but they also shut up.

Sera liked that the two of them had resumed picking at each other. For some reason it gave her a sense of comfort and familiarity. And she was starting to think Riq wasn't so bad after all. Anyone who could keep up with Dak just might be a friend for life.

"Glad that's settled. It's this way." Gloria started off down a path leading to the woods behind her butcher shop.

Sera gave her horse a light kick and followed.



As they rode through the trees, Sera kept hearing tidbits of conversation from Dak and Gloria about history — Gloria’s future. For the most part it amused Sera, but she was a bit appalled when Gloria turned to her and asked, “Is he telling the truth? The world travels around the *sun*?”

How could anyone actually think the Earth was stationary? They obviously knew nothing about gravity and centrifugal force.

They eventually left the woods and went up a long, sandy hill, then crested a rise and stopped when a stunningly beautiful bay came into sight below them. Sera almost gasped at how breathtaking a view it was — greenish-blue water, bright buildings lining the hillsides surrounding it, majestic ships with sails furled, floating in the harbor. No one said anything, but a quick look around showed Sera that the boys were just as impressed.

“We’ll be at Stonebull’s in a matter of minutes,” Gloria announced as she got her horse walking again.



They’d gone out of their way to avoid the eyes of the Time Warden — who may very well have been freed by then — or anyone who might work for him, swinging away from the main road and coming back again where it met the sea. As they entered the cobbled streets, there was still no sign of trouble. But Sera was wary — if Gloria could guess why they might have come to this time and place, so could the SQ.

“Here it is,” the Hystorian announced. They had stopped in front of a plain-looking wooden building with steps and a small porch. Gloria swung off her horse. “Come inside with me so you won’t be sitting targets.” She tied the reins to a hitching post after Dak jumped down. “Like I said, it shouldn’t be too hard to get you three on that ship.”

Sera followed Gloria’s lead up the steps and through a rickety door. There were a few tables and chairs inside, but no people. The place smelled like sweat and beer.

“Just a minute!” a man yelled from a back room — the door stood slightly ajar. “Just takin’ care of me bidness, if you know what I mean!”

His accent was strange, almost a mixture of several that Sera had heard before. It made her wonder if Riq's device was having a hard time deciding how to best translate his words.

A gruff-looking man walked out, hitching up his dirty trousers. His shirt was filthy, too. And his face and his hair and his hands. Everything about him. He also hadn't shaved in a few days. But none of this was what stood out most about him.

He only had one eye. And it was a big one, as if it wanted to make up for the lack of its partner — where the other should have been, there was nothing but a big, mangled scar. He had a bandana tied around his head and, noticing everyone gawking, he quickly pulled it down to cover the injured spot.

"Sorry," he grumbled. "Forgets that it ain't the prettiest sight sometimes. Pardon me mishap, if you will. Now, what can we do for you on this fine-weathered day?"

"Where is Stonebull?" Gloria asked.

"Down at the bay, I 'spect. Keeping an eye on the ship's loadin'. Asked me to fill in for him for a spell. So here I am, lookin' at you fine folk, askin' what you might be needin'."

If Gloria was put out by the change in plan, she recovered quickly, motioning at Sera and her friends. "I rounded these troublemakers up for you — they're desperate for money, and I know you're probably looking for some last-minute additions to the help."

"Right we are," he said quietly as he looked the three potential workers up and down. "Right we are. Can't say as we're all that picky, neither. You three willin' to work yourselves to the bone? Sleep little, sit little, eat little, sick up that what you do? Get yelled at and kicked in the tush now and then?"

Sera wanted to say something contrary, but she couldn't risk her voice giving her away. She nodded, and saw the others do it, too.

"Well, that's good enough for the likes of me," the man said with a chuckle that revealed several missing teeth. "And blessed be your little bottoms — I'll be joinin' you on this fair journey to the far reaches of the hungry sea. Hope you're up for it."

Gloria narrowed her eyes. "You're going on the voyage, too? What are you doing on the ship?" she asked.

“Why, I’m the taskmaster, that’s me. In charge of all the lowly workin’ folk. The name’s not important.” He took a step forward and pulled up his bandana to reveal the hideous scar again. “They just call me Eyeball.”



## Up the Gangplank

DAK COULDN'T imagine a more perfect companion on his first voyage across the ocean than Eyeball. Quirky, crude, a vicious scar on his face — probably from a battle with pirates — what more could he ask for? And the taskmaster might be just the right man to seek help from as well. He'd be respected. He'd know everyone on board, and the ins and outs of how things worked.

And if the very sight of the man made Riq visibly uncomfortable, well, that was just a bonus.

“No time to waste,” the man said, grinning his gap-toothed smile again. “My things are already up on the beast, and by the looks of it, you three ain't got much more to your names than a bag of clothes and all your eyeballs. Be thankful for that, by the way. Having just one ain't as easy as it might look. *Look*. Get it? Ha! Let's go.”

He'd been stepping toward the door as he spoke, a slight limp in his right leg. Gloria quickly gathered Dak and the others in a huddle.

“I know this has all happened quickly,” she said, “but we didn't have much choice, did we? The Hystorians are asking a lot of you, but I have faith. I've barely met you, but I already believe you can do it. Get on there,



learn things, scout it out. Find out what the SQ is up to, and do whatever it takes to stop them. Understand?”

Dak suddenly remembered one of the last things his dad had said to him: This wasn't a game. Not only were they walking right into a violent mutiny — and planning to somehow involve themselves — these voyages were scary enough to begin with. The whole crew neversurvived a trans-ocean trip in these days — a few dozen would probably die from disease alone. Happy thoughts to begin their journey.

And he couldn't help but feel conflicted about changing the past. Changing the thing he loved most. Could they really take the Hystorians' word on *everything*?

He realized everyone was looking at him. “I'm totally excited about this. Let's do it.”

“Okay, then,” Gloria said with a motherly smile. She pulled each of them into a hug and then stepped back. “I wish I could be of more help. I wish I could go with you, but you know I can't. Good luck, and remember: The fate of the world lies in your hands.”

Dak laughed. “No pressure or anything, right?”

“Hey!” Eyeball barked from the open door. “If I stand here much longer, I'll have to take care of me bidness again. Let's get!”

A flurry of panic swirled through Dak, but he pushed it down. This was it. His chance to literally live history. The right path would present itself.

“Thanks, Gloria,” he said. “One day there'll be a book about how you helped us save the world.”

And with that, he walked out the door, trusting the others to follow, and hoping he was right.



Eyeball led them through the streets, dodging carts and people and kids who darted around like fish. Their guide didn't say a word, just kept moving with that limp and a grunt every now and then when he saw something that he seemed to take unkindly to. But he never bothered explaining. Dak stayed right on his heels, enjoying every second.

They turned a corner at a large wooden inn, and Dak almost stumbled when he saw the ships docked in the bay suddenly rise up before him. Each

mighty mast seemed to touch the blue sky far above, with pointed beakheads at the front and squared off sterns in the back. They looked just as he'd seen them in countless illustrations. People swarmed all over the ships like hungry ants searching for a spare crumb, and shouts and whistles filled the air. Somewhere, men were singing.

"There she is," Eyeball said, his voice full of pride. He was pointing at the largest of the ships. "*La Santa María de la Inmaculada Concepción*. Destined to do great things, that beauty. If she weren't made of splintered wood and filled with sweat and grease, I'd marry her and have lots of babies."

"For the love of mincemeat," Sera muttered. "Not a good image."

The man didn't seem to hear her. He kept walking, head held high as they got closer and closer. A gangplank had been laid out, and two roughnecks with knives in their belts stood guard at the bottom of it. They didn't flinch or make a move for their weapons when Dak's group approached, which could only mean they knew Eyeball well.

"Afternoon, you buckets of lard," the taskmaster said to them. "Got a few of those extra recruits Stonebull's been hoping for. These ugly little runts ought to do."

"Hey!" Sera said in protest. But then she quickly shut her mouth, and Dak hoped her higher voice hadn't made the men suspicious.

"Shut up, you little weasel!" Eyeball roared. Then to the guards, "That one hasn't hit the age yet, but he'll work hard enough. I'll make sure of that."

"You slugs better be up to workin' right away," one of the guards said, a tall man with a ridiculous mustache. "Lots to do before setting sail tomorrow. Slack on the job and you won't be aboard when we go."

"We'll make you proud, sir," Dak said enthusiastically before he could stop himself. Riq groaned next to him and Sera gave him a dirty look. Dak hardly noticed.

"Up with ya, then," the other guard said, before launching a long, slimy spit into the ocean water.

"Follow me," Eyeball said. He stepped between the two armed men and started walking up the long plank.

Dak motioned for Sera to go next, then Riq. Dak wanted to savor every moment of this. He'd forget for now that they could very well be dead in a

few days. With a deep breath of satisfaction, he headed up the narrow strip of thick wood.

The ship seemed so much bigger now, almost like a living thing — especially with the workers moving about every last inch of it. There was even a guy working on the furled sail at the very top of the mid mast, looking as if he'd fall to his death with the slightest wind or misstep.

Dak stepped onto the lower deck of the ship, where his two friends were straining their necks to take it all in. Eyeball was talking to a group of men in hushed whispers, one of whom stood out from the crowd. He was tall with broad shoulders, and dressed much nicer than anyone else. He had that look about him that said he expected people to do whatever he told them to do.

The man suddenly stepped away from the group and approached Dak, looking square into his eyes. Dak realized he'd been staring. Squirming under the man's gaze, part of him wanted to turn and run back down the gangplank. But he stood his ground and waited to see what would happen.

“Welcome aboard the *Santa María*,” the man said, holding out a hand. Dak timidly took it, and the guy about ripped his arm off shaking it. “My name is Christopher Columbus.”



## Scrub Scrub

HISTORY HADN'T been kind to Columbus. Those few stories that even acknowledged his existence didn't paint him as the nicest guy. But now, with so much at stake, all Sera wanted in all the world was to not get kicked right off of the man's boat.

She had seen this look in Dak's eyes before, after all. They were wide and dazzled . . . which meant he was about to do something really stupid.

"I can't believe I'm actually meeting you," her friend said. "The books I've read have been critical, but —"

Sera kicked him in the shin to shut him up.

"Ow!" he shouted, jumping up and down while he held his leg. "What was that for?"

Columbus let out a huge laugh. "Oh, how I love the stupidity of these kids you bring on the ship, Eyeball. They remind me of my own son." Then he switched from amusement to fierceness faster than Sera could blink. "Now get them working! And I better not see any more of this horseplay, or we'll have people in the brig by the time we launch tonight!"

With that he stormed off, shouting orders left and right as he went. Sera saw him kick someone in the rear end.

Dak looked at Sera, almost sad. “Guess you *have* to be a jerk to lead a ship full of thugs.”

“You want to give us away?” she whispered back to him. “Careful what you say!”

“Hey, that rhymed.”

Sera wanted to strangle him.

“You poppycocks done?” Eyeball asked roughly. “Embarrassed me right in front of the captain. I ought to dash your brains out and throw ’em overboard.”

“We’re really sorry,” Sera said. “My friend is just excited that we’re here and got a little carried away. We’re ready to work.”

A huge grin spread across the man’s face. Several of his teeth looked rotten and about to join their long-lost partners. “That’s good, then. ’Cause you’re gonna be worked to the livin’ bone.”



Eyeball lived up to his word.

Sera spent the next few hours working harder than she’d ever done before. And it mostly involved crawling around on her hands and knees, scrubbing the wood of the upper decks. Every last muscle in her body ached. Dak was helping her, and Riq was behind them spreading out pitch — a black tarlike substance that sealed the wood and protected it from water.

Despite having the easiest job, Riq complained the most. But they didn’t talk much, because every time they did, someone would yell at them to shut their traps and get back to work. It had become impossible to tell who was in charge anymore, but everyone on board seemed to have the right to boss them around. Eyeball showed up every now and then, threw out a few swearwords for good measure, and then he’d disappear again.

Sera was scrubbing away when she heard voices above her. She looked up to see a couple of men fixing a rip in one of the sails with some thick twine and a large needle. She couldn’t quite tell what they were saying, but she thought she heard the name “Amancio,” and one of them was pointing toward the back of the ship.

She nudged Dak, then turned to look. Two men — one short, one tall — were making their way along the decks. They both had long black hair and shirts that revealed their entire arms, which were ripped with muscle.

“Those’re the Amancio brothers,” she whispered.

“You’re right,” he said back. “I’ve seen paintings, and that’s definitely them! The tall one is Salvador, the shorter one Raul.”

Sera flicked a glance at Riq, but he was too far away to join the conversation. “What do you think? Is this mutiny supposed to happen or what?”

“I don’t know. We need to snoop around and learn more, I guess. We’ve only got a few days before they do it.”

“Huh? How do you know that?”

He gave her his special look that said, *How can you possibly doubt my infinite wisdom?*

“Slacking on the job, are we?” a voice said from behind them.

Sera spun to see that the Amancios had stopped directly in front of them. The taller one — Salvador — leaned over and put his hands on his knees.

“So you’re the ones old Eyeball brought in for us today, eh?” he asked. The man smiled, and he looked way too kind for someone about to throw the captain overboard. “Well, work hard and you’ll do great things here.”

He straightened, and then his brother Raul spoke. “Great things indeed. You’re going to be a part of history, boys. Is this your first voyage?”

Sera and Dak, both a little starstruck, only nodded.

Raul looked out at the distant sea, where the sun was almost ready to dip below the horizon. “Ah, there’s nothing more invigorating than the open sea. You pips are gonna love it.”

The two of them marched off, stopping to talk to each worker they passed.

Sera looked at Dak and raised her eyebrows. “Did we just get a pep talk?”

“I kinda like them,” he said, then got back to work.

Sera did the same, her shoulders aching with every push and pull of the brush.



They worked into the evening, right through the launch of the ship, which Dak was devastated to miss. But Eyeball had a talent for showing up every time Dak attempted to sneak off to the ship's railing. He was still grumbling about it an hour later as they scrubbed by the light of lanterns. They'd finished most of the area they'd been assigned when Eyeball appeared again, seemingly out of nowhere.

"I heard you met the Amancios," he said. "They approve of you wretches, I reckon."

"They said that?" Sera asked, feeling a little burst of pride.

"Ha! No such thing. But they didn't throw your tails off the ship, so that says it rightly enough. Now come on. You've barely done a blastin' thing, but it's time for a meetin' with the captain."

*Barely done a blastin' thing*, Sera repeated in her head. She fought an urge to poke the man in his remaining eye. But it was all she could do to walk straight on the bucking, rolling ship.

The meeting he'd mentioned was for the whole ship. Nearly three dozen people packed onto the lower deck, body to body from fore to aft, some having to climb up onto the masts and rafters to fit. Christopher Columbus stood on the highest deck, looking mostly down on his men. *And, unknowingly, one girl*, Sera thought. The Amancio brothers stood to each side of their boss, which made Sera feel a prickle across her shoulders. The captain had no idea what history had in store for him.

Then Columbus began the meeting with a statement that emptied her head of all other thoughts.

"Listen up, crew." His voice boomed through the night. "It's come to my attention that there's a mutiny planned on our voyage."



## Listening Ears

THE REST of the meeting was a bunch of noise to Dak. He couldn't focus, could barely hear over the chatter going on all around them. Columbus said something about how there'd be no stopping him, that the voyage would go on as planned. Dak wanted to look at Sera, talk to her, but he knew it'd be risky. Every eye on the ship was now searching faces for clues that might reveal who the scheming culprits could be.

And Columbus seemed even more like a pompous jerk than he had before.

Dak's heart raced and his mind spun. Was their mission already jeopardized? What was their mission?

Columbus had grown quiet and was waiting for the crew to do the same. Shushes hissed through the air until everyone finally went silent.

Their captain leaned forward, his face grave in the lantern glow. "There'll be no mercy. No quarter. Anyone who plots against me will be thrown overboard. Anyone who *reveals* those who plot against me will have their pay doubled. I've put Salvador and Raul in charge of this matter, so all suspicions and reports should go directly to them. For now, we will get our rest. You are dismissed."



The crowd erupted again into sound, everyone talking over everyone else, bustling about and heading this way and that. But Dak couldn't move. The Amancio brothers were in charge of investigating their own planned mutiny. He didn't know if that helped or hurt his task. Sera stepped in front of him, a forced smile on her face.

"Well, shall we find our spots to sleep?" She said it loudly, with a piercing look in her eyes that said he needed to snap out of his stupor. Now was not the time to look out of place. Someone would suspect them.

He shook his head to get the cobwebs out and then nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, we better."

Eyeball appeared then, having pushed his way through the crowd, barking orders as he went. When he saw Dak and Sera, his eyebrow arched above his lonely namesake. "You two lookin' a mite tired, I'd say. Better rest up before the sun pops her head over the horizon and says boo. Gonna work you to the bone again. You'll see."

"Where do we sleep?" Sera asked. "Nobody's shown us our room."

Eyeball exploded in a fit of booming laughter. "Your room? Your *room*?" He paused for another round of guffaws. "You'll be sleeping on the splintery floor with a dozen other louses like yourself. Now get belowdecks before I change me mind and make it the floor of the sea."

Dak and Sera rushed off, rejoining Riq and following a small crowd of others who looked as pathetic as they. Down the ladders they went, into the stinky bowels of the ship.



As they descended, Dak noticed that Salvador and Raul had come along, not far behind, then broken off to go somewhere else. Before Dak could think about the danger, he grabbed Sera and Riq by the hands and led them in the direction the brothers had gone.

"What's our plan?" asked Riq in a low voice.

"I don't know," whispered Dak. "But they're probably going to talk about what just happened, right? Maybe we can listen in. Maybe we can offer to help with their investigation, so we can figure out who's on which side."

They rounded a tight corner just as a cabin door thumped shut ahead of them. Neither of his friends protested as he crept up to the door — in fact, they followed him, crouching close to listen. Dak’s heart pounded like a gorilla trapped in a cage — they couldn’t risk this for long. The three of them leaned in and put their ears against the wood.

The voices were too muffled to reveal which brother was which, but their words were clear enough.

“It’s going to be tougher than we thought.”

“How did he find out? I thought we’d rooted out all the spies.”

“I don’t know. But this better be the last time we have to do all the dirty work.”

“You know it will be. We’ll rise quickly up the ranks of the SQ once this is done.”

Dak’s heart had slowed, but it was also breaking. He’d known deep down that this was probably the reason they were here — that the mutiny was one of the Great Breaks, that it never should have happened — but it still hurt to hear it.

Heavy footsteps sounded, and the three of them straightened up and scurried away from the door — a good thing because Eyeball came thumping around the corner.

“Burn me crusty lid!” he roared. “Where’d you lumps go off to?”

Riq spoke quickly. “Sorry, sir. Somehow we took a wrong turn. Can you help us?”

Eyeball scrunched up his face, but he looked more annoyed than suspicious. “Dumber than a cured slab of ham, you three. It’s back this way.” He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

They headed that direction, Dak’s head buzzing. There was no doubt what they had to do now. Dak. Sera. Riq. The Three Pathetic Musketeers.

They had a mutiny to stop.



## Riffraff

THEY ENDED up in a corner of a low-roofed room that would've looked cramped and uncomfortable *before* a dozen people packed inside of it. Two low-lit lanterns hung from the rafters. Each member of the crew had been given a scratchy wool blanket, and Dak and Sera now sat with their backs against the rough wood of the wall, people of all ages around them. Riq was just a few feet away, already lying down, his chest slowly rising and falling.

“How'd he fall asleep so fast?” Sera asked. It was the first they'd spoken since Eyeball had chased them off. But the shock of the dreadful news they'd learned — and what it meant for their mission — was evident in her eyes.

Dak shook his head back and forth mockingly. “The little cowboy is all tuckered out. Hey, I guess there's not a shower on board, huh.”

Sera wrinkled her nose. “Imagine how bad this place is gonna stink in a week.”

“A week?” Dak asked. “Try a couple of months. These voyages aren't like Caribbean cruises, ya know.”

“What's your story?” someone said.

Dak looked over to see a boy, just a couple of years older than him by the looks of it. He was filthy, and the ship hadn't even left yet.

"Our story?" Dak repeated. He didn't feel ready to use his translation device to make friends quite yet. But it was now or never — they'd need help if they were going to mutiny against a mutiny. "Just needed some work, like everybody else."

"How about you?" Sera asked. "What's *your* story?"

"Got nothin' else in life. My name's Ricardo." He nudged the boy to his right, a darty-eyed kid with messy hair. "This is Francisco. And this is Daniel." He gave a jerk of the head to his left. Daniel was much older, but had a blank look on his face that made him look young.

"Where are you from?" Dak asked, but immediately regretted it. He didn't want the same question returned to him.

"A small village about a hundred miles from here. Decided maybe we should skip town when the mayor put a price on our heads."

The boy named Francisco spoke up, wiping the hair out of his eyes. "Like all our thieving was such a bad thing. People's gotta eat, right?"

"People's gotta eat," Daniel followed up, a goofy grin on his face. "Or people's gotta die."

"Where are *you* from?" Ricardo asked. "Your accent is . . . weird."

Sera opened her mouth to speak but Dak hurried to cut her off, scared she'd get something wrong. "We're immigrants. Been all over. Never settled." He flashed a quick look at Sera, trying to communicate that being vague was best.

"Got stories to tell, I bet," Ricardo said. "Stories to hide. Doesn't matter. We're all the same now. Brothers, startin' all over."

Dak nodded. He liked this guy. "That's right. Brothers." He elbowed Sera just to rile her a little. "This one has been a brother to me since before I can remember."

Sera elbowed him back, much harder. "Yes. I can't tell you how many times I've had to save *this one* from getting his throat slit or his face beaten in by thugs. Not the strongest boy, I can tell you that. Ugly as a burnt stick, too. But he's all I got."

Ricardo and his two friends looked from Sera to Dak and back again, their expressions somewhere between surprise and delight. Then they all burst into laughter.

“It’s gonna be a long voyage,” Ricardo said when the chuckles died down. “It’ll be good to have friends. Especially if this rumor about a mutiny is true.”

Dak’s smile vanished at that. Reality struck home. “Hey, what do you think about all the people lumped with us? Any chance . . . you know, that they could be involved with the plot?”

Ricardo scoffed and smacked his friend Francisco in the head, ruffling the boy’s mop of hair. “People like us? *This* riffraff? No way. We’re the dried scum on the bottom of the bucket.”

Dak took a second and scanned the room, searching their company, barely revealed by the soft light of the lanterns. Shaggy hair, ratty clothes, dirty faces, rotten teeth. The lowest of the low, with no aspirations but to earn a next meal. This was exactly what they needed.

He brought his attention back to Sera and their new friends. “How much can we trust you?” he asked Ricardo.

The boy held out his hand. Dak shook it.

Ricardo gave a stiff nod. “Completely. If you’re alone on a voyage, you might as well be dead. Why are you asking? Why so serious all of a sudden?”

Dak looked at Sera, who he knew understood the thoughts going on in his head. Both of them had doubts about their mission, even after hearing firsthand that the Amancio brothers worked for the SQ. It didn’t help that Salvador and Raul seemed all right, while Columbus seemed like a jerk. But the fact of the matter was this: The SQ ruled the world of the future with an iron fist, and the Cataclysm that Brint and Mari had spoken of seemed to be coming faster and harder with each passing day. Dak and Sera had experienced the evidence up close and personal.

They were Hystorians, and it was time for action.

Dak, his resolve solid, faced Ricardo again. “Riffraff is a good name for this group. We might need to turn them into an army.”



## Awake in the Night

SERA HAD always known that she and Dak shared a special link. As different as they were, they thought alike, and often came to the same conclusions. And she'd shared his line of thinking over the last few minutes.

They were here to do a job. Going to Columbus with what they'd learned was out of the question — there wasn't much of a chance he'd take their word over the Amancios'. Which meant they'd have to get directly involved. But if they were going to stop a mutiny, they'd need help. And the sorry bunch of runaways and criminals surrounding them might be their best shot at finding any. Especially since the SQ probably paid them no attention. Looked at them as powerless and therefore worthless.

“What's this army stuff about?” Ricardo asked Dak. “Why ya need such a thing?”

Sera leaned forward and whispered in Dak's ear. “Are we sure about this? Totally?”

“Hey, no secrets,” Ricardo snapped. “Not a good way to start.”

Sera sat back. “Sorry. I was just making sure. This is a big deal.”

“I think it's okay,” Dak said. “We don't have much time — it's supposed to happen soon.”

“What’s supposed to happen?” Francisco asked.

Daniel — the older man who looked lost in a world of his own — suddenly laughed. “Sun’ll go down, I bet. Then the moon’ll come up.” He laughed again, this time with a snort.

“Oh, jeez,” Ricardo said, but his tone was more playful than annoyed or embarrassed. “Our friend is a lot smarter than he looks. Aren’t you, Daniel?”

“Two plus two is four,” the man responded. “Four plus four is eight. Take away the four times two and zero is your mate.”

“Huh?” Dak asked.

Sera liked the man. There was a twinkle in his eye that said he knew more than he was letting on — that maybe he didn’t know how to socialize and this was how he’d learned to make up for it.

“Anyway,” Ricardo said. “What were you getting at?”

Sera decided it was time to go for it. If they were going to do something about fixing this Break in history, they needed help and they needed to get started.

“You heard what the captain said,” she began. “That there’s rumor of a mutiny planned. Well, we actually already knew that and . . . we’re here to stop it.”

“How could you possibly know about it?” Ricardo asked. “Did someone send you?”

Sera hesitated. Telling the complete truth was *not* an option, but maybe she could avoid lying, too. “Exactly. We have friends in high places and they sent us here, secretly. I know it’d be impossible to prove everything to you, but we know exactly who is plotting against the captain.”

“Who?” Francisco asked, his eyes alit with interest.

“Would you rat brains shut up!” someone yelled from across the room.

“Sorry!” Sera answered.

Everyone in the group scooted closer together and leaned in. Sera couldn’t help noticing Ricardo smelled of fish as Dak started whispering even more quietly. “It’s the Amancio brothers. I know, I know — hard to believe since they’ve obviously earned the captain’s trust. But it makes sense if you think about it. Pulling off a mutiny isn’t easy, so you’d need someone high up to be in charge of it. Otherwise it’d be difficult to make the rest of the crew follow the new leaders once it’s done.”

“Do you know what they’re planning?” Ricardo asked.

“From what I’ve re —” Dak stopped, and Sera knew he’d been about to say something about what he’d learned in history books. Fortunately, he’d caught himself. “We were told that three days after we launch out to sea, the two brothers are going to take the captain in the middle of the night, gag him, bind him, and throw him overboard. The next morning, they’re going to blame the disappearance on two *other* officers, men who are fiercely loyal to Columbus, then throw them off the ship before anyone really knows what’s going on. Just like that, we have new leaders and the voyage keeps on truckin’.”

Sera winced at that last word. She might not be a history buff like her best friend, but she was pretty certain they didn’t have trucks in the fifteenth century.

“Wow,” Ricardo said. “Serious? That’s all supposed to go down three nights from now?”

“Yep.”

“And how do you know all this again?”

Sera answered. “We have very good sources and powerful bosses.” She hoped that it was enough.

“Who do you guys work for?” Francisco asked. “Come on, you can tell us.”

Sera looked at Dak, eyebrows raised.

“Let’s just say we’re looking out for the interests of Queen Isabella,” he said. “She believes in Columbus, and we believe in her.”

Ricardo grinned. “And you believe she’ll come through with a handsome reward for your loyalty, I bet.”

“Then you’ll help us?” Sera asked.

“Oh, we’ll help you. Won’t we, boys?”

Francisco nodded, shaking his mop of hair again, and Daniel laughed, which from him evidently meant yes.

“Good,” Sera said. “Let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow we can scout around, learn some things, maybe even get some evidence. Then tomorrow night we’ll see if we can rally the rest of the people down here.”

“Sounds good,” Dak said, and the others all nodded.

Sera wrapped her blanket around her shoulders and lay down, squirming and twisting until she found the least uncomfortable position that she could



manage. She still had the Infinity Ring tucked away in the satchel, which she kept strapped around her body and cradled to her stomach. She expected to have a hard time falling asleep, but all that scrubbing from earlier caught up to her and pulled her into dreamless oblivion.



The world was dark when she was jerked awake, a rough, callused hand gripped tightly over her mouth. Someone had her arms pinned to the hard floor below her. She struggled, tried to free herself, tried to scream, but it was all pointless. All she could hear was her own muted whine.

Then a voice whispered in her ear, the breath hot. “Shut your trap or I’ll slit your friend’s throat. Now.”

Sera stopped, went completely still. She couldn’t see a thing.

“That’s a good lad. Now you’re coming with me, nice and easy. If you scream when I let go, it won’t be pretty.”

The hand left her mouth, then she was pulled up and onto her feet. Someone stood behind her, keeping her hands clasped painfully in the small of her back. She heard the smack of stone against stone, saw a spark, and then a lantern lit up, its flame small but casting enough light for her to see a man standing just a couple of feet away, regarding her coldly.

With one eye.



## The Brig

"LOOKS LIKE we have some talkers in our midst," Eyeball said. "Talkin' about things that ain't none of their bidness. And . . . *spying.*"

Dak and Riq were right next to Sera, held by two more of Eyeball's thugs. She couldn't even move enough to turn and get a good look at them.

A few people had awakened on the floor around them, including Ricardo. She eyed him, trying to warn him to keep quiet. The thought crossed her mind that maybe he had betrayed her and Dak somehow, but the look on his face was genuine shock. With some fear thrown in.

"Nothin' to say for yourself, eh?" Eyeball asked with a sneer. "At least you've got some gumption, I'll give you that. Take these brats to the brig and make sure they don't get no breakfast."

Sera concentrated on not crying as the burly men dragged her away.



She didn't think it possible, but they went even deeper into the ship, to a dank, smelly pit that had several small cells along its length, each outfitted with bars and chains. All of them were empty, which didn't surprise Sera

considering they had just left the dock. They had the honor of being the first criminals of the voyage.

Eyeball opened up one of the cells and the men literally tossed Dak, Sera, and Riq into it. Sera landed with a thump, smacking her head against the wall. She cried out, the first sound she'd made since being taken. Dak grunted then rolled up into a ball, moaning with pain. Riq lay on his stomach, his head nestled in his arms as if he were asleep.

There was a rattle of chains then the click of a lock. Sera looked back to see Eyeball staring down at her through the bars of their new prison.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," he chided them. "I should've known you three wastrels were up to something when you came beggin' to get aboard at the last minute. And sneaking around like that. The only reason I don't throw you on the docks right now is because I want you in me sight. Answerin' me questions when the time's right for askin'. I hope you three enjoy discomfort and pain."

He turned and left, hanging his lantern from a hook before disappearing up the rickety ladder with his three goons.

Sera crawled over to Riq, who hadn't moved yet. Dak's moans at least told her that he was alive.

"Are you okay?" she asked, gently shaking Riq's shoulder.

He rolled over onto his back. Sera gasped when she saw the hideous swelling of his right eye, the puffy skin already turning purple.

"One of his thugs punched me on the way down here," the older boy said in a strained voice. "For no reason — I wasn't resisting."

Even though they'd all been mistreated, his almost childlike explanation just about broke her heart.

Dak groaned again, wincing from some unseen ache. "I thought I liked that stupid cyclops."

"I wonder what happened," Sera said. She showed Riq how to tilt his head to maximize the blood flow for his aches, then moved to sit against the damp wood of the wall. "I knew we should've been more careful in there. Someone obviously heard us and tattled."

Dak's face was all scrunched up in pain or anger, or both. "This would make more sense if we were plotting *against* the captain, but we were talking about *saving* him. I guess the Amancio brothers have allies everywhere."

“We should’ve been more careful,” Sera repeated in a deadened whisper.

“I’ll say,” Riq replied. “I rest my eyes for one minute and you two go and botch the whole mission.” He gingerly prodded his swollen temple. “I guess there’s nothing for it but to use the Ring to get out of here, then warp back in. Assuming you haven’t mislaid it.”

“No, I haven’t mislaid it,” Sera said bitterly. She pulled the Infinity Ring out of the satchel, happy that she’d kept it on her while sleeping — and that Eyeball clearly hadn’t expected it to hold anything of value. “But we can’t just hop around with it. It’s out of the question.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Dak. “That’s our ace in the hole!”

“Do *you* want to do the calculations? Look, this thing doesn’t just move us around in time. It lets us travel through space, too. Every time we use it, I have to input global coordinates — while compensating for the rotation of the Earth, the Earth’s orbit around the sun. . . .”

“So you’re saying you can’t figure it out,” said Riq.

“I’m saying that there’s no way I can transport us back onto a moving ship. So unless you want to end up in the Atlantic Ocean circa August 1492, we need another plan.”

“We need to break out,” Dak said, as if he’d just announced he needed to use the bathroom. “That’s it.”

“No problem, right?” Sera said. “Just break on out. Okay, go ahead and do it.”

Dak frowned at her. “Don’t be a smart aleck. I’ll come up with something.” He leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

“I’m sure you will,” Riq muttered. Impossibly, he was snoring a minute later.

“What a weirdo,” Dak said. “He could sleep on the tip of a weather vane.”

Sera smiled sadly, and looking at her best friend, everything going down the drain, she thought of his lost parents. “I’m so sorry about your mom and dad.”

Dak seemed surprised, but grateful. “Thanks. I just . . . I just hope we can figure this out and maybe help them.”

“Yeah, me, too.” She thought of her Remnants, and how they might stop if they pulled off a miracle and managed to fix all the Breaks. Again, she

wondered if it was better not to have them, or to at least hold on to those pseudo memories. Either way, she felt like she lost.

She sighed and put the Infinity Ring away, then tried to get comfortable. Maybe her mind would work better after a long nap.



She woke up later to the sound of rattling metal.

Dak was shaking the prison door back and forth, the iron hinges squeaking and squawking against the wood. But the door only moved about a half an inch in each direction. It was obviously doing no good.

“Chill!” Riq yelled at him, scrambling to his feet. “You’ll rip your own arms off before you get that door open.”

Dak took a step back. “Just wanted to get my mid-morning workout in. We’ve gotta figure out a way to get this thing open. And is anyone else in the mood to upchuck with the boat bobbing up and down like this? Blech.”

“It’s probably worse being down here where we can’t see outside,” Sera said. She stood up to join him, examining the chain and lock, then the bars that went from floor to ceiling with a gap of only a couple of inches along the bottom and top.

“It doesn’t look very promising,” she said. “But the three walls are made out of wood — maybe we can do something with that.”

They each took a wall and started inspecting. Sera crawled along the back one, which she assumed was part of the ship’s hull because of its slight curve and dampness. As soon as she had that realization, she stopped — it wouldn’t do much good to escape into the ocean and sink the ship while they were at it.

“I might’ve found something,” Dak announced.

Sera had just turned to see what he meant when there was a sound of hands and feet scuffling down the ladder. She looked to see Ricardo jump down the last few rungs and land solidly on his feet. He ran over to the cell, his face tight with worry.

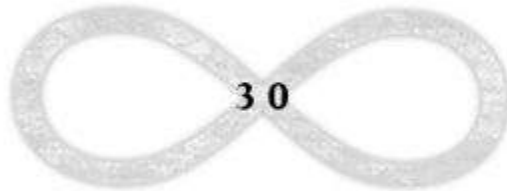
Sera and the others rushed forward to talk to him.

“What’s going on?” Dak blurted right before Sera almost asked the same question.

“They’re gonna kill me if they catch me down here,” Ricardo said through heavy breaths. “But I needed to tell you something. We found the kid who ratted you guys out and made him spill everything. He said that when the Amancio brothers were told about you . . .” He stopped and his face grew pale.

“What?” Sera pushed.

Ricardo swallowed. “They ordered you be killed tomorrow morning.”



## Bread and Water

“DEAD BY morning. Just in time to get rid of us before their big mutiny,” Riq said.

Dak knew that he should be terrified — that he should go curl up in a corner and bawl his eyes out. But the immediate threat did something else to him — it made him realize he couldn’t waste one more second feeling sorry for himself or it’d be over for everyone.

“What’re we gonna do?” Sera asked. She looked at him and her eyes were hard. She knew the stakes.

Dak tried to clamp down on his panic. “Okay, Ricardo. Get out of here before they catch you. Sneak around and see if you can find us some weapons. Anything we can use to stop this from happening. Hide them where you can get to them later. Then you need to talk to every person you can trust — anyone loyal to Columbus. You’ll have to use your judgment. Don’t give out too many specifics, just in case. But we need to act tonight, as soon as the crew is asleep. Have people ready.”

“At least now you know we were telling the truth,” Sera said to Ricardo. “The Amancio brothers obviously want to silence us.”

The boy nodded. “I’ll do what I can up there. But what about you guys?”

Dak grinned — no one else knew about the discovery he’d made right before Ricardo had dropped in on them. “Don’t worry. We’ll be there to help.”

“Now go!” Sera yelled.

Ricardo ran to the ladder and shot up the rungs.



“That’s it?” Sera asked. “For the love of mincemeat, that’s your grand escape plan?”

“You got something better?” Dak pulled on the board again, felt it give an inch or so. It ran along the bottom of the wall between their cell and the one next to it, and if they could pull it all the way free, he thought maybe they’d be able to get another board loose, too. Just enough to crawl into the next cell — which was unlocked.

“No, I don’t,” Sera responded as she gave the wood her own tug. “But this thing seems pretty solid, loose or not.”

“Let me try,” Riq said, already gently pushing Sera aside. “You kids don’t have fully developed muscles yet.”

Dak felt he had to say something back to preserve his dignity. “Well . . . you don’t have a fully developed brain, so I guess we’re even.”

“Good one,” Riq said blankly.

“Yeah, good one,” Sera added.

Dak smiled as if he’d meant for his comeback to be lame. “All right, tough guy, show us how manly you are and pull that thing free.”

Riq tugged and tugged, but the board didn’t move any more than it had for the others. Dak almost felt elated, until he realized this was their only chance of escaping certain death.

He sighed. “We’ll just have to keep working at it. Take turns so our fingers don’t fall off.”

“Looks like we have all day,” Sera said.

Riq kept yanking on the stupid board.





Three hours later, the piece of wood had come loose another inch. It had started to make an ugly screeching sound with every pull, and Dak's head was aching from the noise. They shifted turns about every ten minutes, but it was starting to seem hopeless.

At one point while Dak was working on it he heard the sound of someone coming down the ladder and he had to jump away from the wall in a hurry. It was Eyeball, carrying a loaf of bread and a small pail of water. Two guards were with him, looking utterly bored out of their minds.

"Here you go, you louses," Eyeball said. "I was tempted to let you starve until we threw you overboard, but me softer side shone through. I'm a beacon of light, I know."

One of the guards keyed open the lock and pulled the chains loose. Eyeball stepped forward and threw the bread inside — Riq caught it. Then the man set the small bucket of water on the floor.

Dak tensed, seriously considering hurling himself at Eyeball. But the armed guards made him think twice.

"Eat," the man said. "Nothin' more tasty in this world than bread and water. Don't you fret now — we'll be enjoyin' a nice rabbit stew in the captain's hall." He smiled and winked his one eye. "Lock 'em in."

The guard repositioned the chains around the bars, pulled the links tight, then locked them in place. The three men disappeared up the ladder.

Dak was the first to the water, dying of thirst. He picked up the pail with both hands and drank steadily for ten seconds.

"Hey, save some for us!" Sera yelled. "And what about germs?"

Dak smacked his lips and let out a satisfied sigh, then handed the water to her. "Serious? Germs?"

"I was just kidding." She took her own long gulp.

"That was the most glorious thing I've ever tasted," Dak said.

Riq divvied out the bread and they wolfed that down, too. And then it was back to work on the stubborn board.



By the time evening came — which they could only guess at because they were far from any sign of the sky outside — they'd given up. Dak sat against the opposite wall and stared at the board that would bend but not

break. He didn't speak, and neither did anyone else. The depressed mood was almost like a living thing — a monstrous, invisible creature that shared their cell, sucking the life out of them.

They'd have to rely on Ricardo now. Dak and the others could use the Infinity Ring to escape to another time and place, hoping that their warnings would be enough to spark a mutiny against the mutiny. Riq had figured out where they needed to go next. Sera had programmed the Ring for a quick exit. But Dak hated that idea, *hated* it. He didn't even want to know where they were going next. They'd come here to do a job — trusted by the Hystorians — and if they failed . . .

“What if we go back to before we boarded the ship? Could we stop our past selves from getting on board?” He asked it without any enthusiasm.

“It's way too dangerous,” Sera replied. “Interact with our past selves? Have two Infinity Rings coexist in the same place? Time and reality are too fragile. It's probably why the Breaks have done what they've done in the first place.”

“Well, thanks for the encouragement,” Dak muttered.

“Uh, it's not my fault how the fabric of reality works.” Sera shrugged her shoulders.

They lapsed into a lonely silence.



At some point, Dak fell asleep. He didn't know how much time had passed when he was awakened by the sound of chains. Groggy, he rubbed his eyes and saw that Eyeball was standing there. The man had already opened the lock and was working to remove the chains from the prison door.

Dak jumped to his feet, suddenly more awake than he'd ever been. This was it — they'd come for them. He turned to Sera, who was pressed against the far wall, eyes wide open.

“Hey,” he said, “get the Ring out. We need to . . .” But then he stopped. Eyeball was *alone*. And there were three of them. They could take this guy easily.

But Eyeball's next words put a stop to Dak's scheming. “Need to travel back to the future, eh? Or maybe farther into the past?” He finally got the

chains loose and opened up the door, its hinges creaking. “Poppycock. You didn’t think Gloria would let you on this blasted chunk of wood without making sure you had a friend aboard, did you? Come on, now — it’s time to save this ship.”



## Window to the Soul

“DON'T SIT there like a wart on a witch's nose,” Eyeball said. “Come on!”

“B-but,” Sera stammered. “How . . . why . . .” She didn't even know where to begin.

The man laughed. “Oh, wash my boots, kid. . . . I've been puttin' on an act 'cause you never know what side the guards are on. Gloria and I were even careful back in town — SQ's been crawling like lice all over the docks for weeks. But she sent word ahead while you lot took the scenic route. Besides, I'd have hoped you'd seen my crystal clear heart through the beauty of my glorious eye. Now come on. I've learned enough meself to know we gots to stop this mutiny.”

Dak looked like his jaw muscles had been removed.

“Dak?” she asked, nudging him with an elbow.

He finally snapped out of it. “I'd just . . . I'd kind of given up. But then you came along by yourself and I was hoping we could beat the tar out of you. And now you're letting us out. I'm a confused boy.” But then a huge grin lit up his face. “Let's do this thing.”

“Beat the tar out of me, huh? What a dumb kid.”

“Finally, someone’s said something that makes sense,” Riq said as he walked out the open door. Sera followed, butterflies swarming in her gut. This was it. They were finally at crunch time and she couldn’t pretend it wasn’t scary.

Once they were all outside of the cell, Eyeball gathered them round and spoke in a low voice. “I noticed that smelly boy, Ricardo, sneak down here this morning. So I approached him — oi, does that bloke stink like fish or what? — and told him I was on your side. He didn’t believe me — I thought his rank little heart might explode on me — until I showed him some weapons I’ve hoarded over the last couple of voyages. By hoarded, I mean stole. Anyway, he’s done a fine job of gathering your Riffraff army, as he calls it. Did I mention that boy smells?”

“Yes,” Sera said. “You did. Never noticed it myself.”

“Then there must be somethin’ clogging that little nose of yours. Try pickin’ it more often. Works for me.”

“Ew” was all Sera could get out.

Eyeball got serious. “We don’t have much time. Since word’s gotten out about their plan, the brothers are planning to strike at midnight — I’ve got me own spies about, you know.”

“How do we know you’re on our side?” Riq asked.

Eyeball looked hurt. “Why in the blazes would I be lettin’ you out if I weren’t? I’m doin’ it mainly for the love I have for Gloria, I tell you. She doesn’t know it quite yet, mind your smarts. But me heart’s been hers ever since I first laid me eye upon the glorious vision of her clobberin’ a cow with that club of hers. Ah, what a woman.”

He touched a hand to his heart. “We figured it best to hide our little cahoots, wantin’ to be safe and all. But I been working with her some months now. And so here I am, at your service. One eye or none, I’m the best you got.”

Sera found herself trusting the man. *Why would* he let them go now if he wasn’t on their side? Dak and Riq seemed to agree with her by the looks on their faces.

“So, what’re we going to do?” Dak asked. “Should we just smash into the Amancios’ room? Throw them overboard? Stop this thing before it even gets started?”

“Don’t be as stupid as you look,” Eyeball spat. “Do that and we’ll be the ones accused of a mutiny. No, sir — we need to lie low until those turncoat brothers make their move against the captain. Then we come in and save the day. Every slimy-haired runt on this ship will know we’re the heroes then.”

Sera couldn’t hide her worry. “That’s the plan? What if the guards come down and see that we’re gone? What if the Amancios do something bad to Columbus before we can save him? Slit his throat or poison him?”

“What if the moon cracks open and drops lamb chops on us?” Eyeball growled. “What if me legs fall off and start dancin’? We’ll do our best, lad. Or should I say *lassie*?”

Sera’s face colored. “Brute force just doesn’t seem like the most thought-out plan is all.”

Riq shrugged. “Sometimes you just need to go for it.”

Eyeball huffed. “Are we really going to stand here like brain-dead flamingos and talk it over?”

“Like I said,” Dak interjected. “Let’s *do* this thing. I can barely stand it. If we’re not going to do what the Hystorians sent us back to do, what’s the point of being here? It’s time to act, Sera.”

She looked at him for a moment, then finally nodded.

“Right,” Eyeball grunted. “Up we go.”

They headed for the ladder.



They slipped past the guards at the top easily because they were snoring up a storm, practically lying on top of each other. Eyeball mentioned as they passed that he had helped them with their insomnia by pouring some powder into their drinks — a concoction he’d gotten from a mean old hag he’d met in the slums.

*Valerian, probably,* thought Sera, though her knowledge of medicinal herbs of the era was limited.

As they slunk their way through the narrow, cramped halls and corners of the ship’s belly, she felt claustrophobic and nauseated and tired of the smells of body odor and foul breath. Soon enough, she told herself. Soon

enough they'd be fighting for their lives in the wide open, nothing around them but air and sea.

They finally reached the hatch in the floor that led down to their short-lived sleeping quarters of the previous night. But instead of going down, Eyeball moved past it and stopped at a seemingly random spot farther along. He shushed them, then started running his fingers along the wood of the wall. There was a low grating sound and a panel popped out into his hands — he gently placed it on the ground.

“Weapons,” he whispered.

Sera moved forward to stand beside him as he reached into the cubbyhole and pulled out knives and swords. She held her arms out and he stacked the weapons there like firewood. When the pile got heavy, Riq helped as well. In the end, there was an odd assortment of at least a dozen blades.

“Okay,” Eyeball said, winking his lone eye. “Let’s hope to the sea gods your Riffraff can swing these blasted things without choppin’ their own ears off.”

Sera nodded, then looked at Dak. It lifted her heart to see that his face was full of excitement more than fear. Maybe they could pull this off after all. Eyeball went down the ladder into the sleeping quarters first, then Dak. Riq got on his knees to pass the weapons to them — she saw Eyeball’s large hands reach up and grab them. She followed Riq’s lead, glad to be relieved of the burden.

When she looked back up she noticed her reflection in a tiny metal mirror hanging on the wall. At the sight of her face, a sudden and piercing ache seized her heart and squeezed it. She scooted backward until she hit the wall of the narrow hallway. A deep, black sadness filled her — a feeling she recognized all too well.

She was having a Remnant.



## Stairway to Battle

IT DIDN'T last long, ending almost as suddenly as it had started. But the vision that passed through her mind — more like the *absence* of a vision, as if she were supposed to be seeing something but it wasn't there — haunted her deeply in those few seconds. In her mind's eye, she saw her face as it had appeared in the small mirror. And every ounce of her expected a woman's hands to appear and caress her cheeks, a beautiful face to reach down and kiss her forehead. The fact that it didn't happen was so maddening she thought she'd scream, or lose her mind completely. But then it was gone, just like that.

A Remnant. She'd had another Remnant.

She looked at Riq, realizing that she must look crazy.

"You okay?" he asked. His face revealed nothing.

"Yeah," she answered. "Yeah. I'm fine. Just . . . got spooked there for a second."

Dak called out from below. "You guys coming down or what?"

"Be right there," she whispered.

"Never mind," Dak returned. "We're coming up."

Sera glanced at Riq again, and he was giving her a knowing look.



“A Remnant?” he asked.

Sera tried to hide her surprise. Then she nodded.

“If we fix the Breaks, you won’t have to deal with that anymore. Saving the world sounds great, but it’s not a bad deal that we get to save ourselves in the bargain.”

It was the nicest thing she’d heard him say. Not so much the words as the way he’d said it. Genuinely.

“Thanks,” she whispered. A small echo of the pain she’d felt in that short burst of a few moments still lingered in her heart. But there wasn’t any more time to dwell on it. Eyeball’s head popped through the opening in the floor.

“Time for battle,” he said.



Sera got the last pick of the lot from the weapons stash — but it wasn’t too bad. A thin dagger about the length of her forearm. It ended in a vicious point and the blade along the side seemed freshly sharpened, the shiny silver surface almost glistening. It felt completely awkward in her hands. She took a few practice jabs and almost stabbed the only eye their new leader had left.

“Watch it, girl!” he barked. “Oops, now I guess they all know.”

Most of the Riffraff army had climbed out of the sleeping quarters, crowding the small hallway. Ricardo was nearby.

“You’re a girl?” he asked. “For real?”

“For real,” Sera said with a shrug of her shoulders. “But I can fight just like the rest of you.”

“Never said you couldn’t,” he responded with a smile.

Sera felt the briefest disappointment that she’d probably never see the older boy again. She might have ended up liking him a lot — if only he weren’t stinky and could travel through time.

“All right, this is how it’s gonna happen,” Eyeball said to the group. “We’ll go wait right below the decks. The little pipsqueak Dak and I will climb up and watch for a signal that the Amancio brothers’ plan is in motion. Then we’ll all move in and rescue Captain Columbus. Easy as throwin’ dice.”

Sera felt like she had to question things one last time. “That’s really it? Our only plan is to fight our way through a bunch of grown men — brandishing weapons we can hardly hold, much less use?”

“Yep,” Eyeball responded with a grunt.

“Okay. Sounds good to me.” She gave him a smile — a sudden confidence had filled her, though she had no idea where it came from. From the Remnant? A feeling that someone loved her and believed in her — even if it was someone she’d never met? Maybe. Either way, she’d take it.

“Then follow me,” Eyeball said. He set off down the cramped hallway, and the Riffraff army went with him.



Sera could smell the salty air as they got closer, could feel the coolness of it. She didn’t care anymore if they had to fight with men twice her size — at least she’d be able to pull clean, crisp air into her lungs.

Eyeball stopped them at the foot of a steep, almost vertical wooden staircase that led up to the decks, then lined them up against the wall. Sera could see the stars through the hole at the top and she felt a rush of excitement. Dak was beside her, holding a curved sword that looked like it could chop heads off with ease.

“It’s called a scimitar,” he said. “Or it will be eventually, but they haven’t actually coined the term yet. It originated in the Middle East, where —”

“Not now,” Sera said. “Not now.”

“Okay.”

But his gaze didn’t drop from her eyes, and a lot was said between them in the next couple of seconds without a word being spoken. That they were best friends; that they’d been through a lot and were about to go through their worst. But they were together and that made everything all right. They could do this.

Eyeball had climbed up the stairs until his head disappeared past the threshold. After looking in all directions, he crouched back down and called for Dak to come with him.

“Good luck,” Sera said.

“Same to you. Remember, as soon as we know Columbus is safe, we need to get out of here. You be ready with that Ring.”

“I will. It’ll all be over soon.”

Dak grinned. “Until we move on to the second Break and have to start all over.”

“Right.”

“Boy!” Eyeball roared — as much as he could while whispering. Somehow he managed it. “Get up here!”

Dak gave one last nod to Sera then scrambled up the stairs, almost face-planting into Eyeball’s rear end before he realized how fast he was going. The two of them slipped into the night air and out of sight. A hush fell over everything.

Sera closed her eyes and enjoyed the clean feel of breathing the ocean air. She’d often heard people talk about the calm before the storm, and she finally knew what they’d meant. At any second, their world was going to explode into action.

Things began to happen.

There was a distant shout, the words impossible to make out. Then another. And another. A scuffling sound, then a bunch of voices at once, arguing. The ring of metal against metal. The quick *bang* of an explosion — someone had fired a musket. Sera had to restrain herself from sprinting up the stairs before their signal.

Suddenly the booming voice of Eyeball filled the air, turning her heart into a rattling alarm clock in her chest.

“Mutiny! Mutiny! Mutiny! Salvador and Raul are traitors! Rise up and fight!”

Dak’s head popped through the opening at the top of the staircase.

“Riffruffs! It’s time to fight!”



## Mutiny on the *Santa María*

DAK SCOOTED away from the opening as his small army started charging up the stairs and onto the deck. He got to his feet and turned to stand beside Eyeball again. The decks of the ship had been stone silent with no movement only a minute earlier. Now it was utter chaos, people running all over, fighting with swords and shooting muskets — though only a couple of people had those and it took forever to reload them after one shot. This battle would be won or lost by steel.

The problem was that the Amancio-led guards outnumbered the sailors who'd been brave enough to accept Eyeball's challenge to fight back. Hopefully the Riffraffs would turn that tide as they ran screaming in all directions, ready to distract those loyal to the Amancios while Eyeball took the fight to the brothers themselves. It was easy to see who was on whose side — the mutineers were big and strong with shiny weapons, while Dak's side looked pathetic and unorganized, with mismatched weapons and tattered clothing.

But he remembered the lesson of the American Revolution. In battle against an organized enemy, chaos could be effective. And the mutineers definitely hadn't been expecting this.

“Come with me,” Eyeball said to Dak. “You and I are going for the big man himself. Columbus needs our help.”

Sera stepped up beside them. “I’m coming, too.”

Then Riq. “Don’t forget me.”

“All right. Just don’t chicken out when the heads start flyin’,” Eyeball said through a rumbling chuckle. “Come!”

Dak and the others followed as Eyeball ran forward, his stocky legs pumping as he jumped over ropes and buckets to charge toward the upper deck where the Amancio brothers were trying to break into the captain’s quarters. Salvador wielded an axe, and one-third of the door was already shredded into splinters. A light rain had begun to fall from the dark sky, causing the lanterns that hung from masts and rafters to sputter and hiss. Dak could tell that the ship was bouncing more, too, and that the moon and stars had completely disappeared above them. The ship was heading straight into a storm.

The captain’s cabin was on a raised deck that had a short flight of stairs on each side. At the bottom of each of them stood guards loyal to the Amancios, fighting off anyone and everyone who tried to gain access to the platform. Raul had just fired his musket at someone and was busily reloading, shoving a long metal rod down the barrel.

“No matter what happens,” Eyeball said as they approached, “at least the world will know that those turncoat Amancios did in fact mutiny. Even if they win over this blasted ship, they’ve lost in the long run. Their heads’ll be on pikes if they ever dare go back to Spain.”

It hit Dak that they’d already made a difference by being there. They’d revealed the plot, and that alone could change how history evolved in the coming decades. But they couldn’t leave anything to chance — they had to make sure the SQ didn’t reach the New World. They had to.

The four of them rounded a large mast, and the platform of the captain’s quarters loomed above them. Dak looked up to see that Raul had finished his preparation of the musket and was now aiming it directly at Eyeball.

“Watch out!” Dak shouted as he leapt to his left and knocked the man onto the deck, just as the short jolt of the gun’s explosion ripped through the air. Dak heard the iron ball smash into the wood of the mast behind them.

“You’ll all die for this!” Raul yelled. “All of you!”

Dak checked that Sera and Riq had found cover. He scampered to his feet and helped Eyeball get up as well.

“Thanks, lad,” the man said. His lone eye gleamed with rage. “I’ll fight to the death for you. Let’s get those no-good brothers.”

Dak nodded, a fire burning inside him — a courage he’d never felt before in his life. “One each, right?”

“Aye. One each. You go left, I’ll go right.”

Dak wasted no more time talking about it. He turned and ran for the steps on the left side. A couple of Riffraff had ganged up on the guards at the bottom, swords ringing as they struck one another, the sailors slowly losing their ground. Sera and Riq joined Dak, and they slipped past the fight and bounded up the stairs.

Salvador was just pulling his axe back for another blow on the door when it suddenly burst open, shreds of wood flying everywhere, and Christopher Columbus came charging out with a sword. Eyeball was on the far side, by the other steps, trying to fight his way through a pair of guards. Raul had been preparing his musket for firing again but gave up, tossing it over the railing and pulling a knife from his belt. Dak went for him, screaming as he charged, raising his scimitar even though he had no real idea how to use the thing.

Raul stabbed at him when he approached but Dak swung his weapon downward, smacking the blade. It flew out of the man’s grip and clanged against the hard wood of the deck. Dak felt a rush of pride, but Raul immediately came in with his other hand, squeezed into a fist, and punched Dak in the cheek. Pain exploded through his head, completely stunning him. Lights flashed before his eyes. He dropped his weapon and started falling, but someone caught him, pulled him back onto his feet.

It was Sera. He knew it even though he couldn’t see her. Her arms were hooked under his, supporting him until he got his wits back. Riq had tackled Raul in the meantime, but the man pushed him off as Dak looked on. Riq smacked against the railing and let out a small cry. Dak put his weight back on his feet and Sera let go, stepping forward to stand beside him. Together they took in what was going on all around them.

To their left, Christopher Columbus was battling with Salvador, the steel of his blade clanging against the man’s axe. Ahead of them, Eyeball had just clobbered a guard and was now charging forward to help the captain.

To the right, below the deck on which they stood, Ricardo and his two friends were fighting a couple of guards, and they even seemed to be winning. Battles raged everywhere, and the Riffraff army was helping the sailors turn the tide against those loyal to the Amancios.

*We just might win*, Dak thought.

Lightning suddenly lit up the sky, its thunder booming almost immediately. The clouds opened up and rain fell in torrents. The ship rocked as if a big wave had just crashed into its side. Dak bumped into Sera and they both stumbled across the deck until they slammed into the wall of the cabin. Dak was able to right himself but Sera fell to the floor, right at the feet of Columbus, who appeared to be gaining the upper hand against Salvador — thanks to Eyeball, who'd attacked from the other side.

Dak was just about to reach down and help Sera when he heard a man shouting at the top of his lungs — the scream of a madman. Dak looked up to see Raul charging at him, his eyes filled with insane rage. Before he could react, the man tackled him, wrapping his arms around Dak's torso and throwing him to the ground. They hit the stairs and tumbled down, rolling over each other until they hit the bottom. Dak felt like every inch of his body had just been punched at once and his head spun with dizziness.

Raul's screams didn't stop. He gripped Dak even tighter and lifted him up, struggling to his feet as he held the boy in his arms. Dak squirmed and kicked — tried to free himself — but the man was too strong.

"I don't care what else happens," the Amancio brother shouted over the rain and thunder and sounds of battle. "But *you* will die! Tonight!"

Then, with another shriek of lunacy, the man ran forward to the railing of the ship and threw Dak over the side. Screams now erupting from his own throat, Dak plummeted into the dark depths of the stormy sea.



## Breathless

THE OCEAN swallowed him.

It was cold — like a living creature of ice that bit every part of his body at once. He was dizzy and hurt and disoriented. Everything was dark and freezing and he couldn't tell what was up or down. His lungs screamed at him to breathe, to take in air — now, now, now! But he overpowered the urge, knew that he if he did so he'd only pull in water and drown. So he struggled, kicked, and flailed, tried to push himself to the surface, hoping that he'd naturally go in the right direction.

A pain throbbed in his skull. His insides felt as if they might explode. He scissored his legs in the thick water, pulled at it with his arms. The need for air became all powerful, an inferno that roared in his heart and through his veins, squeezing his lungs as if someone had wrapped ropes around them and were cinching them tighter and tighter. He wanted to scream, but knew that would be the end, too.

He broke through the water's rough surface.

After sucking in a huge gulp of air, he sputtered and spit out the seawater that came in with it. Pumping his arms and legs to tread in the choppy ocean, he stuck his mouth as high as he could to breathe. Lightning



still ripped white, jagged streaks in the sky above, and the rain lashed at his face. His body felt like it was stuck on a slow-motion trampoline that just wouldn't stop, the sea moving him up and then down again, up and then down again. And the cold. He was already losing feeling in his hands and feet.

He twisted around to see that the ship was about a hundred feet away, its lanterns' glow eerie in the midst of the storm. With the rain and the bobbing of the waves and the lightning flashes making the darkness more stark when they vanished, it was hard to tell how the battle was going. But he caught the silhouette of a man standing straight and tall at the railing, looking right at him. And he knew who it was.

Christopher Columbus.

They'd done it. They'd really done it. Too bad Dak was going to celebrate by getting eaten by sharks. Or drowning. He couldn't decide which was worse.

"Dak!"

Impossibly, he heard a voice coming from somewhere nearby. Still treading with all of his strength, he looked around, straining to see through the darkness and pounding rain. There was another flash of lightning and he saw a small boat just a dozen feet away, its occupants rowing mightily. Sera. Riq. Eyeball, his namesake body part seeming to glow as it stared him down.

Pure elation filled Dak from top to bottom. He waved a hand into the wet air. "I'm here! Right here!"

"We know, you idiot!" Eyeball roared with a laugh.

Sera leaned forward to be heard over the storm. "We did it! Salvador is dead and his brother was thrown overboard right after you! Columbus is in charge and the battle's over!"

Dak's heart leapt at the news. And it had never felt so good to see his —

Someone grabbed him from behind, gripping an arm around his neck like a vice. Dak gasped, beat at the thick muscles of the forearm that had begun squeezing the life out of him.

"Dak!" Sera yelled. "Dak!" She was helpless on the boat, could do nothing but shout his name.

"I told you," a man whispered into his ear. "I said you'd die, and now you will. You and me both."

Raul.

Dak could barely breathe. He kicked his legs below him, trying to hit the man in the knee. He pulled and swatted at his arm, but nothing worked. He was choking, and once again his lungs begged for air.

“Down we go,” Raul said.

Then he pulled Dak under the water, just as Sera yelled his name again.

Cold water. Blackness. Pain in his neck, his head. Pain all over. No air, his chest screaming for it. The sheer desperation of it all shot a burst of adrenaline surging through his body and he went ballistic, punching and squirming like a rabid animal until he somehow got free. His head broke the surface again and he sucked in a breath, but he knew the madman would be on him again in seconds.

“Sera!” he yelled hoarsely. “Use the Infinity Ring! Take us out of here! Now!”

They were close, but not close enough to help. Sera’s face was a mask of fear as she leaned over the edge of the boat, reaching helplessly for him.

Dak felt movement behind him, a hand sliding up his back, reaching for his neck.

“Sera!” Dak shouted.

Raul pulled him back below the water. Dak barely got in another breath before it happened. An arm slipped around his neck again, squeezing even tighter than before. Dak’s eyes bulged open, but he saw nothing. Only black water. His mouth opened up and the cold liquid rushed in; he spit it out. He gripped the man’s arm with both hands but knew it was pointless now. He kicked out with his legs because he had nothing else.

Lights began to dance before his eyes. Numbness filled his chest, replacing the pain. His throat was doing funny things as he fought the urge to suck in a breath of pure salt water, which would fill his lungs and kill him.

In that moment, death waiting to take hold, he thought of his parents. He closed his eyes, and in his mind he saw that goofy look on his dad’s face when he’d unveiled a new invention. He saw the sweetness in his mom’s eyes after she’d kissed him on the forehead before saying good night. He saw that last glimpse of them he’d had before they’d been sucked into the wormhole, vanishing into time itself.

He saw them, and almost felt their presence. He decided it was time to quit fighting. He was floating now. He sensed people grabbing at his shirt, pulling on it. But it was too late. Death began to drag him down.

The last thing he saw was a whirlpool of lights.



## Changes

BRINT SAT brooding in the tiny office of the Hystorians' fallback shelter, staring at an old class photo hanging on the wall. He was still depressed, but he felt he had good reason to be.

They'd lost their headquarters. There was no salvaging it once the SQ had descended upon them. They'd barely survived the attack, and not without some heavy losses. The men and women that had gotten away were now regrouping here, at their hideaway across town. Thank goodness they always planned for the worst.

At least Dak, Sera, and Riq had gotten away safely, and with the Infinity Ring. Not only did it mean they had hope of Aristotle's grand plan finding success, but the time-travel device itself was far away from the reaches of their enemy. At least in the present day.

Mari came in, a raised bruise forming on her cheek.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Well enough." Brint looked back at the photo, not sure why it had him so mesmerized — he'd glanced at that thing a million times before. "How about you?"

"I'm fine. Why are you staring at the wall like that?"

“Huh?” His gaze moved to her. “Oh. Sorry. Just . . .”

An odd feeling came over him — pleasant but unexpected. Indescribable. He stood up and walked over to where the photo hung and took it off the nail, held it up to inspect it. Columbus High School, top of his class. It had been twenty-five years. Hard to believe.

“Did you know my school was named after Christopher Columbus?” he asked Mari.

“Of course. Who else would it be named after?”

Brint shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just having good memories of my time there. Forget it.” He put the photo back in its place, straightened it. Then he turned to face his longtime partner. “What do you think? About today?”

“I think we had some lucky breaks. And we survived to fight another day.”

“Always finding the positive, aren’t you?” Brint asked. “Well, who knows. Maybe for once time’s on our side.”



## Time Out

SERA HAD saved her best friend from drowning. He so owed her.

She sat on the edge of an old wooden pallet, in the middle of a dark and dusty place that looked like a warehouse of some sort. It's where she'd appeared after pulling Dak out of the ocean and warping herself, Dak, and Riq away from the storm. They lay next to her, all three of them sopping wet.

She shivered from the cold and looked around. Streams of light broke through slats and holes in the ceiling, the glowing beams full of dancing motes. The place was dank and smelled of old wine. Barrels and caskets and boxes littered countless rickety shelves.

"Where are —" Dak began to whisper, but then he cut off and scrambled to his feet. He sprinted across the dirty floor of the warehouse before Sera could ask him what he was doing. She grabbed Riq's hand and pulled him up, then they both ran after Dak.

He'd come to a stop at the door to the place. A poster had been nailed to its surface, with an artist's pencil drawing of a man and a woman standing side by side, staring glumly at whomever might look back. Below their

picture, a phrase was scrawled in big black letters, but in another language — Sera knew it must be French.

Dak was frozen. Sera couldn't breathe. Riq glanced back and forth between them, confused.

“Those are Dak's parents,” Sera whispered.

“What does it . . .” Dak began to ask.

Riq's face had gone pale. He cleared his throat. Then he translated.

“Wanted. For crimes against the Revolution.”



Turn the page for your Hystorian's Guide to Revolutionary Paris.

It's a dangerous time in history. And you're about to see it for yourself in the action-packed Infinity Ring game. This is your strategy guide for staying alive.

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# INFINITY RING



THE KING OF  
DIAMONDS

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## MEMORANDUM FROM ARIN

---



It is up to YOU to save the French Revolution!

In 1792, the French Revolution was defeated when members of the SQ snuck into the Royal Storehouse in Paris and stole the French Blue Diamond — one of the biggest and brightest of the Crown Jewels. Above is a sketch of the blue diamond in its setting of more than a hundred smaller gems.

The SQ passed the French Blue off to King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette, who used it to bribe their way out of the city, raise an army, and brutally crush the Revolution. The SQ has controlled France ever since.

You will have to find a way to prevent this from happening. Jacques, a Revolutionary and our on-the-ground Hystorian, will be able to help you.

Good luck.

— Arin

P.S. Please take photos of important sights for our records. But BE CAREFUL! Photography doesn't exist yet in 1792, so don't let ANYONE see your camera or they'll know right away you're a time traveler.



KNOW YOUR . . .

## REVOLUTIONARY

### TRICOLOR COCKADE

A red, blue, and white knot of ribbons, usually pinned to the hat.

**THE BONNET ROUGE**  
The red cap of liberty. An important symbol of the Revolution.

**CROPPED HAIR**  
(No wig).

**LA CARMAGNOLE**  
Basically just a short coat.

### FUN FRENCH FACTS!

"Liberty, equality, fraternity!"—  
The motto of the Revolution.

**Sansculottes**—  
What the Revolutionaries called themselves.

**THE PANTALON**  
Long pants, instead of the fancy short pants (culottes) of the upper classes.

**THE PIKE**  
A common weapon carried by the Revolutionaries.



KNOW YOUR . . .

## KING LOUIS XVI



**WEAKNESS:**  
Nearsighted (and too vain  
to wear glasses).

**HOBBIES:**  
Studying history, hunting,  
and making locks.



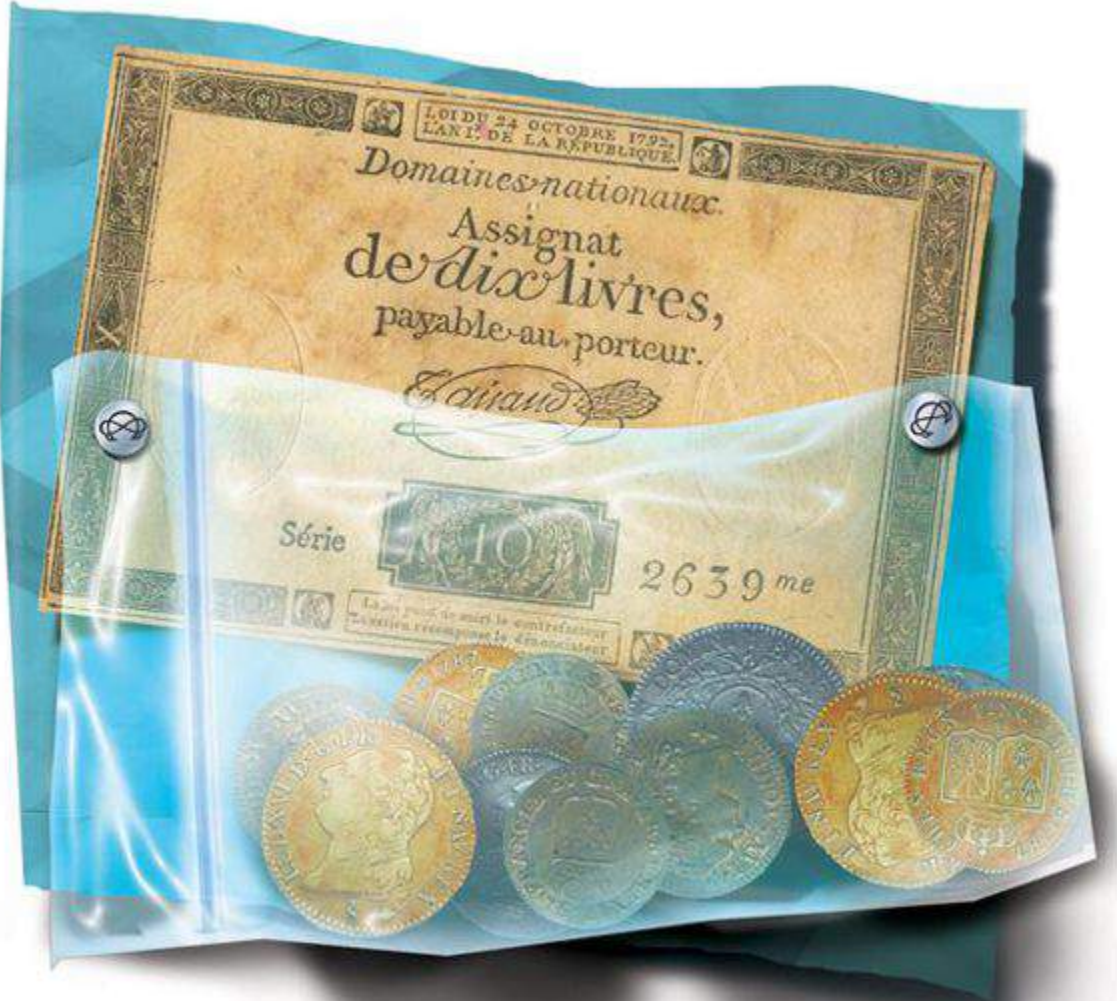
King Louis XVI was a pretty smart guy but unfit for the role of king. He was really bad at making decisions and hated confrontation. (In other words, a perfect puppet for the SQ.)

Hystorians use Timeboxes to stash items that might help travelers from the future.



**DON'T GO SWIMMING.** The sewers empty directly into the Seine, the river that runs through the city. Yuck.

Be on the lookout for currency of the time period!

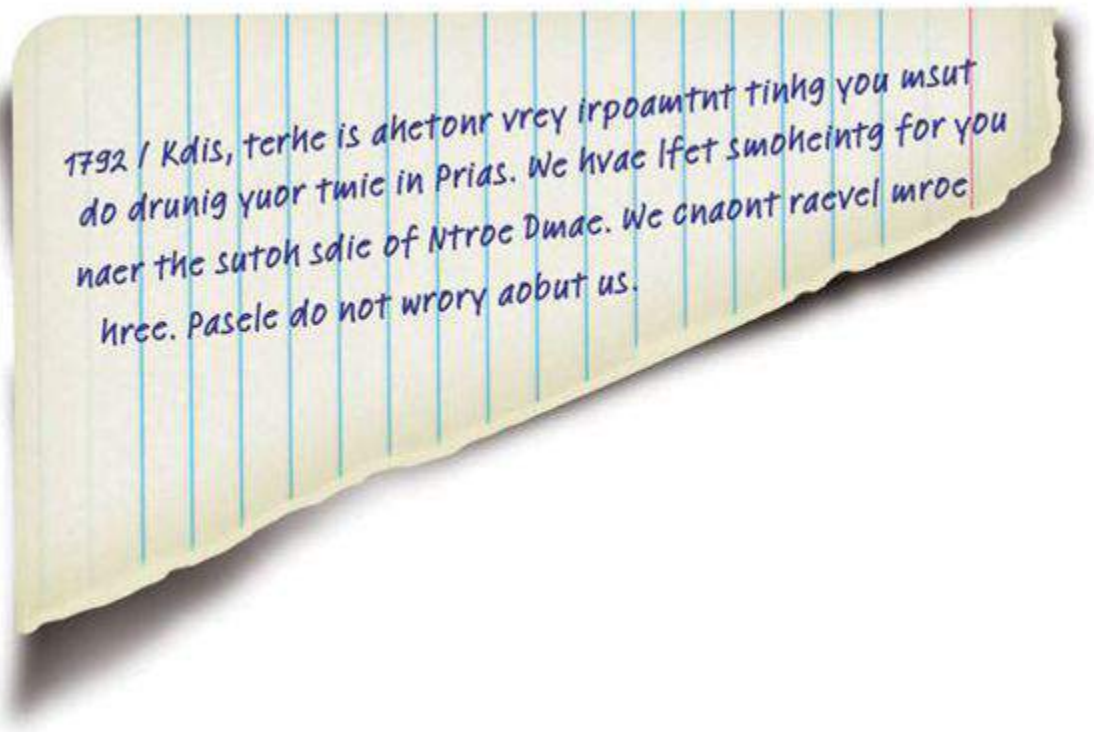




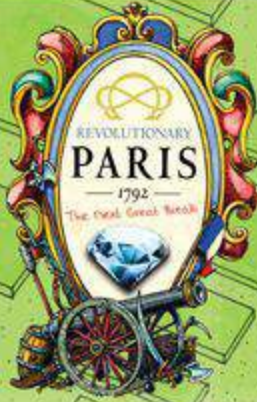
The French Blue, which came to be known as the Hope Diamond, is perhaps the largest and most perfect blue diamond in the world. Still, it's rumored to be cursed. I don't believe in that kind of thing — but you can't say I didn't warn you. . . .



I'm not sure who this note is from, but it seems to relate to this Break. Maybe you'll be able to figure out what it means.



1792 / Kdis, terhe is ahetonr vrey irpoamtnt tinkg you msut  
do drunig yuor twie in Prias. We hvae lfet smohcintg for you  
naer the sutoh sdie of Ntroe Dmae. We cnaont raevcl mroe  
hree. Pasele do not wrory aobut us.



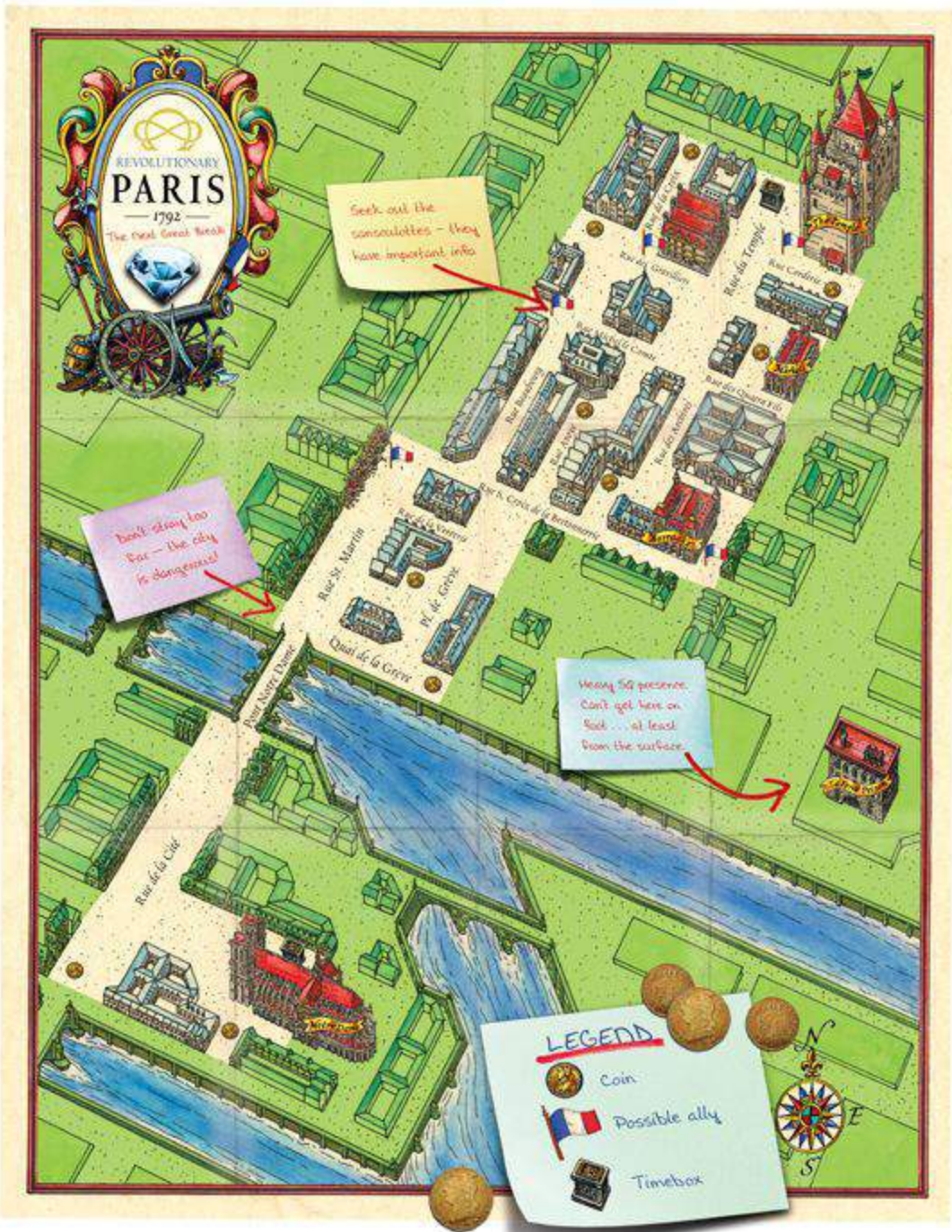
Seek out the consulates - they have important info

Don't stay too far - the city is dangerous!

Heavy SG presence. Can't get here on foot... at least from the surface.

**LEGEND**

- Coin
- Possible ally
- Timebox

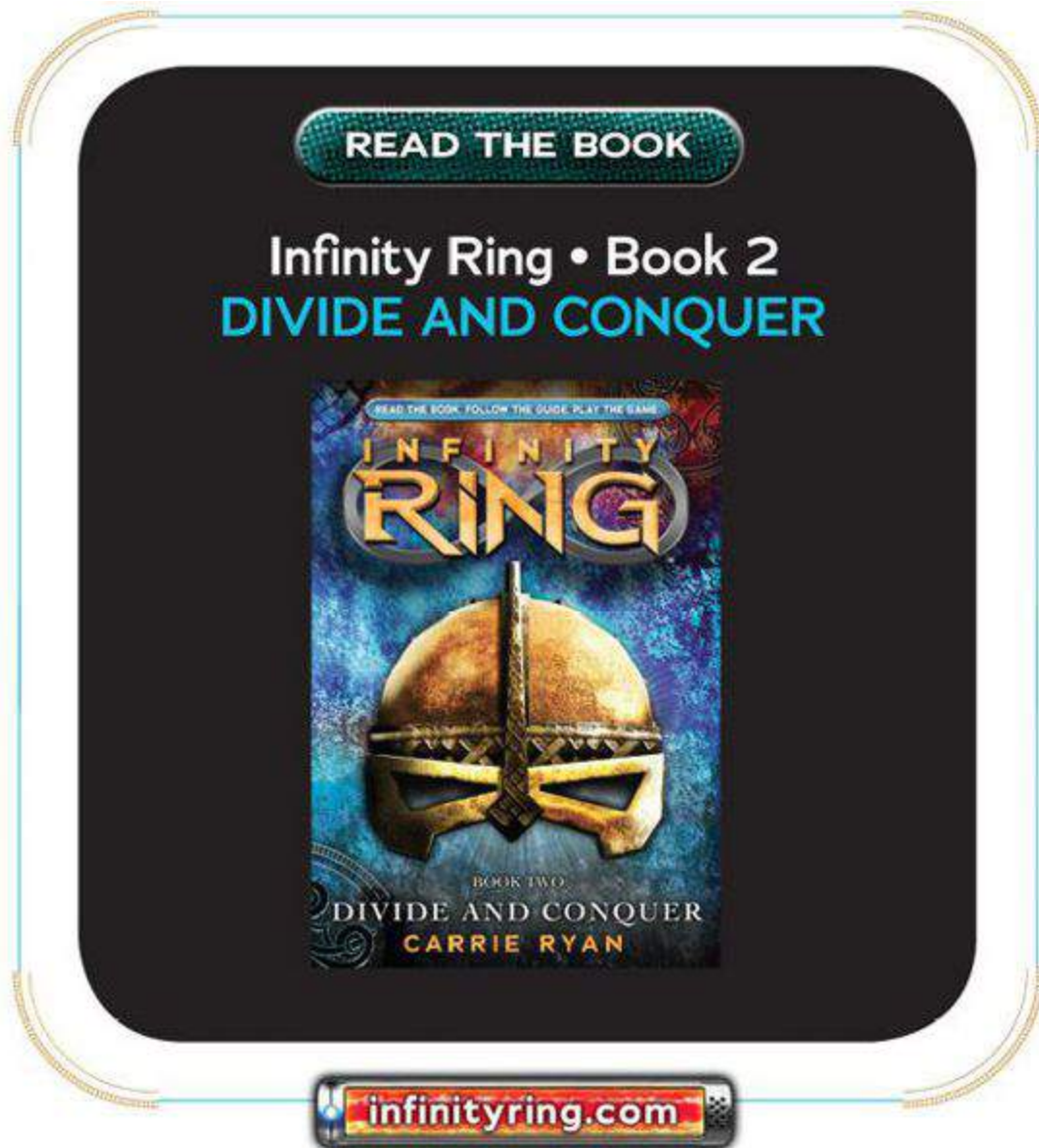






It's a high-stakes historical heist in which you play as Dak, Sera, and Riq.  
The entire adventure unfolds in the Infinity Ring game. Log on now to join the revolution.

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Dak, Sera, and Riq go futher into the past than ever before. It's the year 885 and thousands of Viking warriors are fighting their way across Europe. The Dark Ages never looked so dark!

Includes an all-new, top secret Hystorian's Guide — which unlocks the next episode of the Infinity Ring game.

Turn the page for a sneak peek!

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Below is a sneak peek from Infinity Ring Book 2: *Divide and Conquer* by Carrie Ryan.



WHEN DAK told Sera there were over thirty thousand Vikings across the river, she hadn't really understood what that meant. Now that she was standing on top of the Grand Châtelet — the huge wooden tower on the mainland guarding the northern bridge to the island city — reality hit her. Hard.

Armored men spread out as far as the eye could see, covering the ground of the mainland's north bank more thickly than blades of grass. Even though dusk was falling fast she could see them milling around, setting up camp and sharpening weapons. In the distance, a large band of them hacked at a massive fallen tree with their axes, honing the tip of it to a point. Another group worked to set up what looked to be a complicated catapult.

It wouldn't be long until they pointed everything they had at the ancient wall ringing the island and let loose with all their might. Sera looked behind her into the city. The wall was old and crumbling, most of it constructed over four hundred years ago by the Romans (according to Dak). She couldn't imagine it holding up for long. Even worse, she'd counted maybe two hundred armed Parisian men during the day. Compared to the legion outside, their force was minuscule.

"You do realize that we're outnumbered, right?" she asked.

Riq glanced up briefly as if calculating. "If each man here personally takes down one hundred and fifty Vikings, we should be fine."

"One hundred and fifty heavily armed, bloodthirsty Vikings," Dak clarified.

Sera stared at the two of them. Neither seemed to grasp the magnitude of the situation. "Oh, no sweat, then."

Sera still felt uneasy at the way Riq had so completely twisted history. No matter how much Dak tried to reassure her that his read on their mission here was the right one, she didn't like how little they knew about what was really going on. She was someone who preferred to amass facts, parse through them, and only then come up with a plan of action that had been considered from every angle.

All of this was happening too fast. The only thing that made Sera less anxious was that at the very least the Parisians now had a fighting chance. Originally, according to Dak, after the bishop handed over the city, the Vikings had waited through the night to lull everyone into a false sense of security before destroying the island in the morning. Now, because of Riq, the Parisians had fair warning and were able to marshal their forces and make a plan for defending themselves.

It was an old plan, actually. A few decades before, King Charles the Bald had ordered that cities along the Seine build low bridges across the river to keep Vikings from being able to sail inland too easily. But the bridges themselves were vulnerable to attack. Towers were supposed to be constructed to protect the bridges.

A lot of cities had started the fortifications but never really finished them. Because of that, there was nothing to keep the agile Viking ships from sailing inland from the sea, and they'd taken advantage of this, sending out raids that had decimated French cities that lay close to the coast.

Paris hadn't finished its fortifications either, and now that the Vikings were set to attack, everyone was pitching in to hurriedly build another level on the tower guarding the north bridge.

*I guess procrastination isn't a modern invention,* Sera thought darkly. She had suggested finding a quiet spot for the three of them to hole up in while they worked on the encoded information on the Square. But before they'd had a chance to sneak off, the bishop had asked Riq personally to help out. That's what he got for jumping in as a translator — he'd become too high profile to fade into the background.

Which meant now Sera was tasked with holding rough-hewn wooden planks while Riq and Dak hammered them into place. It wasn't enough of a distraction from the intimidating view, and her mind drifted back to the danger lurking way too close for comfort.

“I’m still not convinced this can work,” she said. “Even with the advance warning, I don’t see how so few men will keep the Vikings from taking over.”

Dak didn’t even stop what he was doing as he responded, “Originally, they didn’t. The Vikings creamed the Parisians and pretty much took everything they could get their hands on before claiming the city as their base of power and moving on to conquer more.”

Sera glanced at Riq, wondering if Dak’s answer was as unsettling for him as it was for her. But Riq seemed engrossed in his task and perfectly willing to ignore both of them. “And you think we’ve changed all that?”

Dak paused. “Maybe?” That his answer was in the form of a question didn’t do much to allay Sera’s fears.

“On the plus side,” Dak added, “at least now we get to see how a battering ram works.” He grinned in his familiar way.

“That’s not really something I would put in the *plus* category,” Sera muttered.

Dak ignored her. “Speaking of how things work,” Dak continued. “As soon as it’s dark I’m going to sneak down to the riverbank so I can check out one of the longships. I want to see firsthand if the re-creation at the Smithsonian was accurate.”

Sera felt her eyes bulge out of her head. “What?” The word came out almost as a squawk and several heads turned her way, causing her to blush. She lowered her voice and gripped Dak’s shoulder. “You’re not leaving this tower, Dak Smyth!”

“It’ll just be for a second,” he argued. “I’ll be careful, I promise. Everyone up here is focused on getting the tower fortified, and all the Vikings are wrapped up in their preparations for tomorrow. No one will notice me, honest.”

Was Dak crazy? He’d done some reckless things in his life, but Sera couldn’t believe he was actually considering leaving the safety of the tower, and alone at that!

“It’s out of the question,” she told him, and for the briefest flash of a moment she felt the dizzy, uneven sensation that preceded a Remnant. She’d had these feelings before — that her life was somehow missing something that she was brushing right up against — but they’d always



happened when she was at home near her barn or when she looked in a mirror.

This time there was something about the phrase she'd just said, her tone of voice and inflection, that felt as though it should have been familiar somehow. She pressed a hand against the wall to steady herself, sweat breaking out along her temples. Dak didn't seem to notice. Or if he did he must have thought she was just upset at his plan to sneak out (which, for the record, she was).

"Listen, Sera," Dak said, setting down his tools and facing her, "when I snuck you into my parents' super-secure workshop and you saw all those whiteboards filled with their plans for the Infinity Ring, I didn't try to stop you from working on it. In fact, if I remember correctly I even brought you a nice ham sandwich."

Dak knew exactly how to make Sera feel guilty and, since she was already unsteady in the wake of the passing Remnant, it was difficult for her to come up with a good response. So she settled on "That was different."

"How?"

"Because there weren't thirty thousand Vikings nearby ready to kill you!" Once again Sera's outburst drew the attention of the workers around them, and this time several narrowed their eyes.

Dak stepped forward and put a hand on her arm. Sera knew as soon as he did it that she'd lost the argument.

"I promise I'll be careful," he said. His eyes were pleading and his voice earnest. "You know how important this is to me. My entire life I've lived and breathed history, and now's my chance to actually experience it firsthand. Please, Sera."

Dak was right; he'd let her play around in his parents' lab even though he knew he'd be in huge trouble if they'd found out. He'd taken the risk because of how much it meant to Sera. She sighed dramatically and Dak flashed her an enormous grin.

"One boat, that's it," she told him sternly. "And first, we figure out how to find the Hystorian. That's most important."

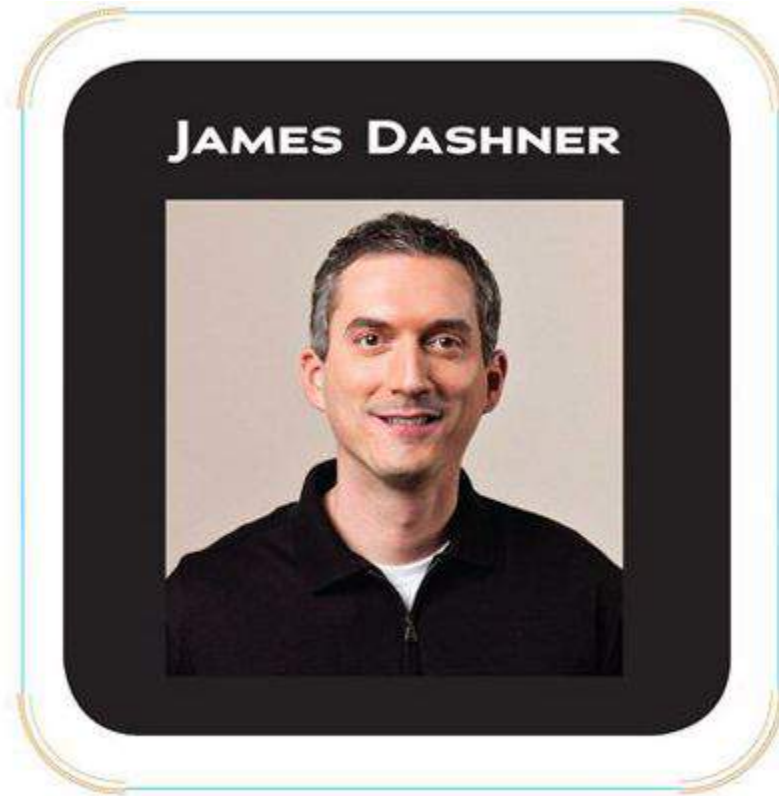
Dak's response was a groan. "But those puzzles are so hard! And when we asked about a roofless inn, everyone looked at us like we were crazy!"

She arched an eyebrow, a skill she'd perfected after spending several hours in front of the bathroom mirror. "Then I guess you won't get to see

your boat tonight.”

Dak buried his head in his hands and Riq slapped him on the back. “Get to work,” he said, almost gleeful at Dak’s despair.





**James Dashner** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of many books for kids and young adults, including the *Maze Runner* and *Thirteenth Reality* series. Born and raised in Georgia, he now lives with his family in Utah. In his free time, James loves to read, watch movies and (good) TV shows, snow ski, and read. (Reading was mentioned twice on purpose.) Learn more at his website, [www.jamesdashner.com](http://www.jamesdashner.com).



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

e-ISBN 978-0-545-38696-8

Cover illustration by Sammy Yuen  
Cover design by Sammy Yuen and Keirsten Geise  
Spanish coat of arms: Wikipedia/Proof02/GNV Free documentation license  
Puzzle rendition of image: Keirsten Geise for Scholastic

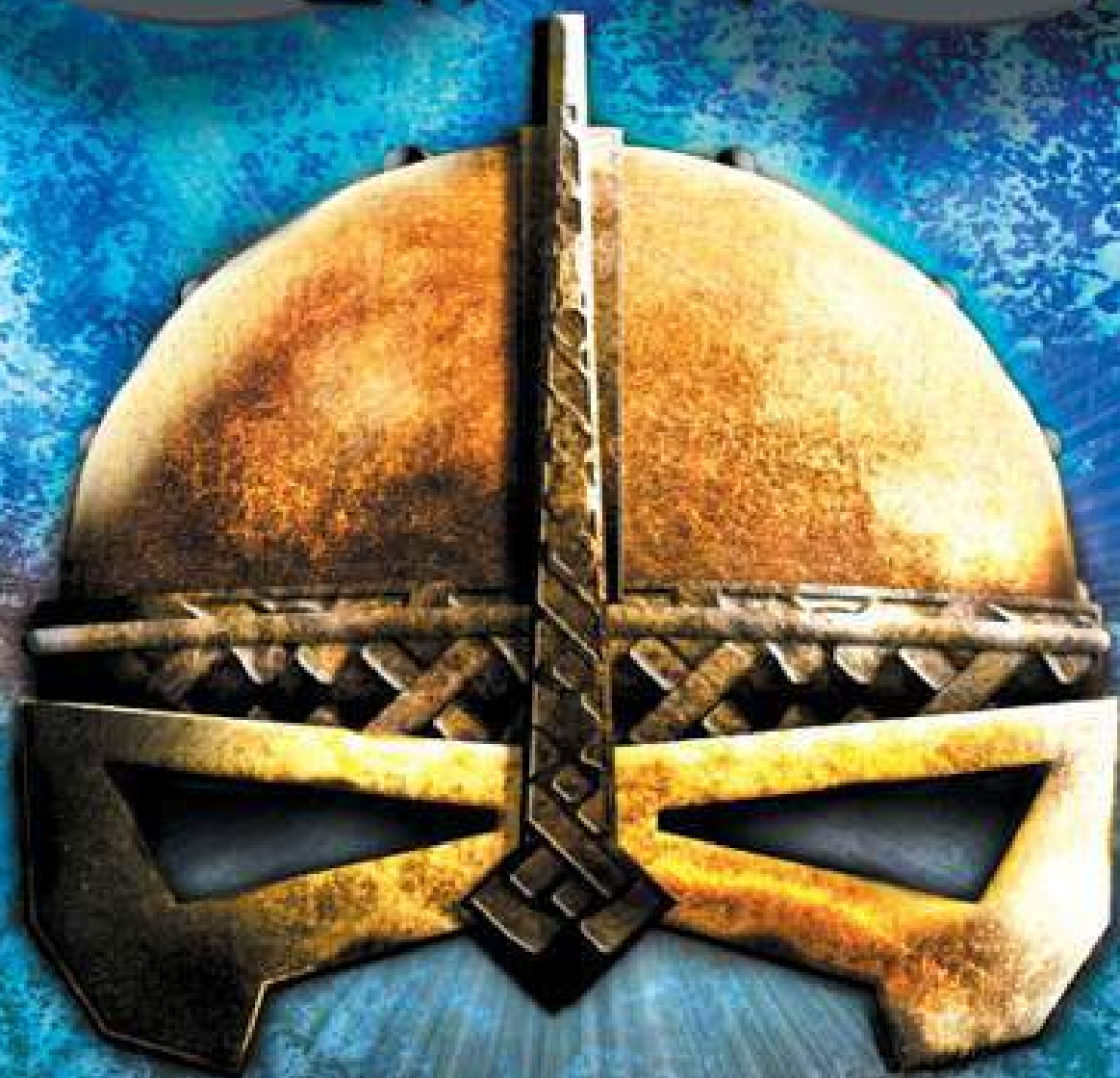
First edition, August 2012

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012  
Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1  
Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141  
Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

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## Getting Sacked

SERA OPENED her eyes. She was staring at the exact same wall she'd been facing when she'd closed them just a moment before. Her stomach tightened with anxiety. "That can't be right," she murmured.

She looked down at the Infinity Ring, grasped so hard between her fingers that her knuckles were white. "I know I put in the data correctly." Just a few seconds ago they'd been standing in Paris in 1792, and then she'd felt the still-uncomfortable squeezing of her skin. It was the tightening of time and space around her as she moved from one era to another. And it should have brought her, Dak, and Riq to 885.

Yet here they were, staring at the same stupid wall as before.

"This is so cool!" Her best friend, Dak, stood next to her, running his hands over the uneven stones with a look of rapture on his face. Apparently he hadn't spent enough time admiring it before they'd attempted to warp through time. It was bound to keep him occupied for a while. After all, Dak could get excited by something as boring as a wall simply because it was historical — and here, *everything* was historical.

She turned to Riq. He was the one who she didn't know as well, and she hated the idea of him thinking her incompetent. "Sorry, I'm not sure what went wrong. This should only take a second," she told him, her mind already whirring through the complicated mathematical equations to find the mistake.

Riq shrugged, as though ending up in the wrong place and time was something altogether ordinary rather than an absolute catastrophe.

“Really, I think we must be dealing with some sort of hidden variable aspect to the quantum entanglement.” As her fingers flew over the Ring’s controls, Sera felt herself speaking a bit uncontrollably, explaining in painstaking detail the scientific theories behind the warping of space and time. She tried to force her mouth closed, but she couldn’t help it. When she got nervous, she talked.

Riq kept his focus on the wall, a frown furrowing his forehead. “I could have sworn this wasn’t there before,” he said, his fingers tracing over a series of scratches in the stone.

“Check it out! There must be thousands of them!” Dak had found a series of footholds and managed to climb to the top of the wall. He was staring out beyond it at something in the distance. Then he looked down at Sera, his entire body vibrating with excitement, like the time (was it really only a few days ago?) that the two of them had gone on a class trip to the Smithsonian.

That hadn’t turned out well — an earthquake had struck and they were almost crushed by a Viking longship on display. Just thinking about it gave Sera a dawning sense of unease. “Dak, maybe you should get down,” she called out. “I’m not sure —”

“Duck!” Riq called out, cutting Sera off.

For a split second Dak looked confused but then he did as he was told, flattening himself against the top of the wall. Just then a storm of rocks and debris came hurtling through the air, raining down around the three of them. The wall shuddered at the impact.

Sera pressed the Infinity Ring to her stomach to protect it as Riq lunged forward, throwing himself on top of her. Now probably wasn’t the best time to realize that none of them had showered in several days, and smelled like it.

Then Sera had another realization. If the arrows slicing through the air around her weren’t enough of a clue, the moment she actually took in her surroundings all thoughts of quantum entanglement fled her mind. The warp hadn’t failed after all.

Where before there'd been the elegant flying buttresses of Notre Dame Cathedral, with its intricately patterned windows, there now sat a dull, plain hulk of a church with thick, bare walls. A palace still occupied the western end of the Île de la Cité, but no longer did it dominate the tip of the island with its impressive turrets and elaborate facades. Everything was different than it had been a minute ago, from the width of the streets to the uneven construction of the buildings to the sounds of men running for cover. Now that she really looked, Sera realized that even the wall Dak had scaled was different. Whereas in 1792 they'd taken refuge against the scrap of an old ruin, now the wall stood strong and sure, rising several yards in the air and securely ringing most of the island.

*Leave it to a genius to miss the obvious,* Sera thought. *This definitely isn't 1792.*

Wave after wave of arrows and rocks pounded into the ground and crashed into nearby buildings. Sera wondered if it would ever end. Somehow, when the three of them had agreed to travel through time fixing the Breaks in history, she hadn't seriously considered the danger they'd be in.

But so far, time travel had offered up one life-threatening peril after another. Starting with the very first trip, when Dak and Sera had warped with Dak's parents to test the brand-new Infinity Ring. They'd ended up in the middle of a Revolutionary War battle, with uniformed men running at them with guns and bayonets at the ready. The group had barely made it out alive — and they'd been separated from Dak's parents in the process.

Sera wasn't ashamed to admit it: She was scared. She and Dak were just eleven years old and Riq wasn't much older — having the fate of the world in their hands felt a bit overwhelming.

When the rubble stopped falling and Riq pulled away, she noticed that he seemed a little shaken, too. At least she wasn't alone.

Of course, then Dak called out, "That was awesome!" from his perch.

"How did you know to tell him to duck?" Sera asked Riq. Whether Dak realized it or not, the warning had probably saved his life.

Riq pointed at the wall. “The picture scratched into the stone — it’s a duck. That we would warp into this exact spot and be facing this . . . I figured it might be a message for us somehow, and I didn’t want to take the chance of ignoring it.”

Sera stepped forward and squinted at the poorly drawn waterfowl. Then she saw something that made her lungs tighten. “It *was* a message for us,” she said, tracing her fingers over two numbers: 34 and 88. “This is a code for my name. Thirty-four is the number on the periodic table for the element selenium. Eighty-eight is the number for radium. The abbreviations for them are Se and Ra — *Sera*.” She cringed a bit. “I know that makes me sound like a total geek.”

“No,” Riq responded with a smile. “You’re talking to a guy whose idea of a good time is tracing the etymology of obscure words. I think it’s pretty cool that you came up with that.”

Sera cleared her throat, unsure how to respond. She wasn’t used to that kind of compliment. “Anyway, it was always an inside joke I had with Dak, but his parents knew about it, too. Do you think they left it for us? How old is this wall, anyway?”

Just then, Dak leapt the last few feet to the ground, landing between them. “Guys!” His eyes were alight with excitement. “You’re not going to believe it. The entire Seine is filled with them for as far as I could see! It’s like a huge logjam out there. You can’t even see the water. They’re everywhere!”

Sera couldn’t help smiling. She’d been Dak’s best friend for as long as she could remember, and she knew he was waiting for her to ask the inevitable question: “What’s everywhere?”

His grin widened. “Vikings! There must be seven hundred ships out there — probably more if you count the barques. Those are the little boats.” He explained that last bit to Riq.

The older boy gave Dak a forced smile. “Thanks, got that. Linguist here, remember? My vocabulary is just fine.”

Dak ignored him. “This is incredible! There have always been debates about how many boats the Vikings attacked Paris with. Some scholars said



they stretched for two leagues but others argued there weren't that many based on the application of operational space in a stationary —”

“Dak, focus.” Sera rolled her eyes, but not in a mean way. She was used to putting up with his ramblings about obscure historical details. And to be honest, she kind of liked it because it was so, well . . . so *Dak*.

He glanced between her and Riq. “According to the history books, there are thirty thousand Vikings on the other side of that wall, preparing for the great Siege of Paris!”

Something sank inside Sera, but Riq was the one to voice what she was feeling. “Did the history books happen to give a date for this sack?”

Dak nodded vigorously. “November 25, 885.”

Sera sucked in a long breath. “That's . . . tomorrow,” she said.

But Dak wasn't finished yet. “Though some historians put the date at November 24 based on the account of one of the monks inside the fortified city. . . .”

Riq looked at Sera, and his expression matched hers. Before either of them could say anything more there was a great blast of horns from the other side of the wall and the roar of thirty thousand men screaming at once. The ground trembled from the force of so many feet pounding against it as the massive horde of Vikings raced toward the city.

Dak seemed utterly unconcerned. “Huh.” His face scrunched up in concentration. “I guess it was the twenty-fourth after all. I can't wait until we get back and I can correct the —”

“Dak!” Sera shouted. “The Vikings are sacking Paris and we're *inside* the city! They're about to attack *us*!”



## Mathy Stuff

DAK DIDN'T quite understand why Sera was so panicked. After all, there was a wall *and* a river between them and the approaching horde of Vikings. While the Paris of 1792 that they'd just left had sprawled far into the countryside, the Paris they'd arrived in was little more than a fortress on an island in the middle of the Seine River. Sure, the stone wall ringing the island was already about four hundred years old and was crumbling in places, but it still gave them *some* protection.

Besides, if he knew his history (which he always did), the invasion wouldn't really get under way until the leaders of each side met to discuss the terms of Paris's surrender. Unfortunately for the people of Paris, surrendering wouldn't be enough to keep the Vikings from stealing provisions and setting most of the island on fire — it was just how Vikings did things. And, okay, thought Dak, they probably shouldn't stick around for too much of that. But they still had time to explore the area and figure out the Break before getting worried.

Even so, it wouldn't be good to get hit by a random arrow, and he could tell Sera was freaking out, so he let her drag him and Riq to the nearest shelter, an empty house nestled between two bakeries. The air inside smelled of yeast and butter, and dust covered most of the surfaces, causing the spare bits of light sneaking through the cracks in the tile roof to sparkle. The space

was narrow, and they wove their way between wooden support pillars toward the deepest recesses of the shelter. Just as they took cover another wave of arrows and rocks flew over the wall, raining down outside.

Thankfully, it looked like everyone else had the same idea as they did and had found someplace safe to hide out. Paris looked like a ghost town. But it didn't sound like one. Even inside their tiny shack, the noise of so many Vikings racing toward the island was tremendously loud. It reminded Dak of going to the biennial SQ games with his parents and the roar of the cheering crowds. Except this crowd was probably more deadly than a couple thousand sports fans.

Now that they were clear of all the falling debris, Sera pulled the SQuare from its satchel. A portable tablet computer given to them by the Hystorians, it was their only remaining connection to the future where, or rather *when*, they'd come from. He noticed her hands shook ever so slightly as she typed out the password to access the files.

“Okay, whiz kid,” Riq said to Dak as he leaned against a rough stone wall. “You're the one who's always bragging about your historical prowess. Any idea why we're here and what's going on?”

Dak let a satisfied grin split his face. “Now look who's interested in what I have to say.” Dak wondered for a second if he'd really get in all that much trouble if he pushed Riq out into the debris storm. He thought better of it when Sera raised her head from the SQuare and scowled at both of them.

“Keep your voices down,” she hissed, though Dak was pretty sure her whisper was louder than her normal tone of voice. “We haven't spoken to anyone here yet, which means our translation devices aren't set for the correct local language.”

Before they'd been sent back in time by Hystorians Brint and Mari to fix the Breaks in history, all three of them had been given earpieces and a tiny device to fit over one of their teeth that would translate anything they said. The only catch was that they had to hear someone talk before the device knew which language to use.

“Sorry,” Dak mumbled, but he still took the opportunity to smirk at Riq. Riq was the language expert — his parents had even invented the translation tool — and he should have been the one to remind them to stay quiet.

“Oh, for the love of mincemeat,” Sera muttered. Apparently she didn’t even have to glance up from the SQuare to know Dak and Riq were staring each other down to see who looked away first. (Riq totally forfeited when he turned to look at Sera.)

The SQuare’s screen flickered a few times. “Any idea if they had time to upload anything on this Break?” Sera asked Riq. “I hate to think about being cast adrift with no help.”

Riq frowned and for once it seemed to Dak like the older boy might admit to not having all the answers. “I think they were able to get most everything on there,” he said. “Are the files not showing up?”

Sera shook her head. “Some of it. I guess until we know how many of the files are corrupted, we just have to work with the information we have.” Dak came to look over her shoulder as she chose the option for learning more about the third Break.

A few words and a long string of numbers flashed up on the screen.

Leave a message after the beep:

326274827332 744332413373433231 8121523274

7121734374 71322123323382535393

Dak groaned. “What kind of a message are they expecting us to leave?” He was good with words — facts and details, especially historical ones. Numbers just tended to swim in his head unless they were specific dates. In fact, sometimes in math class the only way he could remember his multiplication tables was to attach each set to a series of historical events.

He watched helplessly now as both Sera’s and Riq’s eyes tracked back and forth across the screen. This was so not how he envisioned the Siege of Paris going. Thirty thousand Vikings nearby and he was stuck inside a bakery with two geeks more interested in mathy stuff.

“It could be a code or a cipher,” Riq suggested.

“*Hmmm*,” Sera murmured. “I guess it could be a monoalphabetic substitution cipher — like maybe an affine?”

Even their conversation was boring! While they were engrossed in their boring boringness, Dak began to ease his way to the door. He only wanted to catch a glimpse of what was happening outside, get a feel for what was going on.

Already the ground was littered with stones of all sizes, some larger than his head and a few so big they could have crushed a cow if any had been milling about (thankfully, it appeared none had).

Dak breathed deeply, letting a smile cross his face. For as long as he could remember, he’d been in love with history. He even read most historical accounts in old books rather than on SQuares, because he loved how history smelled.

But now it felt like the words he’d read had always been dry. They’d tried to capture past events, to transport him there in his mind, but as he stood on the Île de la Cité, the Island of Paris, Dak realized that the books had been mere ghosts. Reality was so much cooler. Smellier, too.

Just then, the bombardment stopped, and the cacophony of war horns and shouts from the other side of the wall was replaced with the sound of ringing church bells. Dak watched as a contingent of Vikings started to make their way into the city over a low stone bridge that stretched across the Seine from the north bank of the river.

Dak wanted nothing more than to run forward and get a better look, but Sera already had her hand firm on his shoulder. “Don’t even think about it. We have a Hystorian to find. Here, help us figure out what this means.”

She held out the SQuare, and Dak read the highlighted lines:

To find the person whom you seek  
Upset the clue within:  
To lead you to the Hystorian  
Find a roofless inn.

Dak stared at the words, but he had absolutely no clue what they meant. “This should be Riq’s gig — he’s the expert on things like this,” he said. “I’m just the history buff. And as your guide through all past occurrences, I think our time would be better spent eavesdropping.”

He pointed toward a small group of Parisians striding through the inner city. Many of them were priests, with ornately decorated tunics over their cowls. Others were soldiers, their own tunics less ornate and complemented with chain mail.

Dak knew an official welcoming party when he saw one. The priests and soldiers were on their way to meet with the Viking contingent on the bridge, and Dak desperately wanted to be there for that discussion. Although he figured the important stuff wouldn’t happen until they’d all gathered in some central location.

“Those are the guys who make decisions around here,” Dak said. “The Hystorian is probably one of them, or on his way to wherever they’re headed. That’s where the history is going to happen, and that’s where we need to be!”

“You’re forgetting that we don’t look like Parisians,” Sera argued.

“Well, technically we *are* dressed like Parisians. Just Parisians of another century. We’re very fashion forward!” Dak tugged on the ruffles at his wrist and wagged his eyebrows.

“Dak . . .” Sera’s tone of voice left no question — she was getting fed up.

Dak put a hand on her arm. He and Sera had known each other for a really long time, since before they could talk, actually, but sometimes he didn’t understand her at all. These were real, actual, honest-to-Thor *Vikings*. How could she not want to get closer to them? “Trust me,” he said. “Have I steered you wrong before? Besides, I think I know what’s about to happen. And it could be crucial to our mission here.”

Riq looked up from where he was pawing through a low wooden trunk on the other side of the room.

Dak took a moment to relish their undivided attention before diving in. “The small contingent of Vikings crossing into the city is headed by Siegfried, their leader. Well, I don’t know if *leader* is the right word since Viking society

wasn't strictly ordered the same as ours. Usually power wasn't quite so concentrated —"

Sera cleared her throat and began tapping her foot.

"Er, right. Anyway, just before the Vikings sack Paris, Siegfried has a little chat with their bishop, Gauzelin, and asks him to hand the city over. The bishop agrees. The Parisians figure everything's cool — so they're pretty surprised when the Vikings attack the next morning."

Riq frowned. "That doesn't seem sportsmanlike," he said.

Dak shrugged. "That's not really what the Vikings are known for. They were more the pillaging-and-plundering kind of folk."

Sera's body appeared to tense a bit at that. "So this Siegfried guy — what happens after he takes Paris?"

Dak felt the same excitement he always did before imparting cool historical details. "He becomes one of the most powerful men in France. See, he ends up settling down in Normandy, the region of France right across the channel from England. It turns out that bit of land is pretty strategically important — it's the perfect launching spot for an invasion of Great Britain in the eleventh century. Siegfried's great-great-great-grandson, Bill Helm the Vanquisher, does just that!"

Sera and Riq stared at him, and it took him a second to realize that they didn't understand the importance of that. He sighed deeply.

"Every modern-day European monarch is descended from Bill Helm the Vanquisher, AKA the dude who conquered England. And, of course, that means . . ." He felt like a teacher trying to pull an obvious conclusion from his students.

"It means every king, every queen — they're all descendants of Siegfried the Viking," Sera answered, her eyes wide.

Riq was the one to say out loud what Dak had already been thinking. "This siege is about more than just Paris. The fate of the whole world is at stake."

Dak nodded. "And with that much power up for grabs, you can bet the SQ is already here."



## Starting a War

DAK AND RIQ stood just outside their shelter to give Sera privacy while she changed. Dak had to grudgingly admit that Riq had done a pretty good job putting together proper outfits from the scraps he'd found in the trunk. Of course, it had taken a bit of doing to figure out what went where. They'd shoved their old shoes into the bottom of their satchel, since nothing screamed *anachronism* more than sneakers.

That still left Dak in a shin-length tunic, and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. It was way too easy to imagine accidentally flashing ninth-century Paris. And he definitely didn't want to think too much about who'd worn these clothes before (and how long it had been since they'd been washed).

At least Riq looked even more ridiculous in his own getup. "You remind me of my grandfather with your socks tied up around your knees like that," Dak quipped.

The older boy smirked at him. "You look like my grandma in your little dress."

Dak couldn't think of a comeback fast enough and resigned himself to scowling. He watched impatiently as more and more Parisians made their way toward a large stone cathedral. His toes curled in his new (old) boots, wanting to join in the throng.

"So, you think this Viking leader Siegfried might be SQ?" Riq asked.



“It seems likely to me,” Dak said. “Around the late eighth century the Vikings became pretty aggressive and started taking over a bunch of places, pillaging along the way. Before then they’d more or less stayed up in Norway and Denmark, and no one really knows why they decided to expand their territory. Some historians think it’s because, with the Medieval Warm Period, it got easier to head out on the ocean, and others think that available land just became too scarce on the Scandinavian peninsula. Now that I think about it, though, it would make sense that they’d actually be led by SQ going for a big land grab.”

Riq nodded. “So what do you think that means for us? Where do you think the Break is?”

Dak had been thinking about this already, his mind whirring over all the possibilities. “Okay, pretend you’re Siegfried and you’re SQ.” He paused and squinted at Riq. “Well, if you were a Viking you’d have a beard and smell less, but moving on.”

“You couldn’t get a beard if you shaved your head and glued it to your face,” Riq muttered.

Dak ignored that. “So you’re an evil, stinky, *ugly* SQ guy with a big army and you’re traveling all over the world pushing people around. What are you really after?”

“Power,” Sera said as she stepped out to join them. Dak choked on a laugh. Like the rest of them, she was wearing hose fastened at her knees with a scrap of lace, and a tunic draped over a long undershirt and tied around her waist with a belt. From the belt hung a sack with a familiar bulge that could only be the Infinity Ring. A formless brown cape hung from her shoulders to the back of her knees, and what was left of her hair was tucked up into a misshapen wool cap.

“You do a pretty good job passing as a boy.” Dak tweaked the cap, making it fall farther over her eyes.

Riq stepped forward and righted it, tucking stray bits of her hair back up under it. “One of these days we’ll find a time in history when you can get dressed up nicely,” he said.

Dak wanted to groan, but Sera's face lit up at the prospect.

"Anyway," he interjected. "Sera's right — it's really all about power. That's pretty much what history is: people grabbing power and then losing it to someone else." Which is exactly why Dak loved it so much. Science always seemed like a boring recitation of facts, but history . . . it was all one big adventure story.

"That still doesn't help us fix the Break," Riq said. "And we haven't unraveled the code to figure out what we're supposed to be doing here, or figured out how to find the Hystorian."

"Code, schmode — we've got this." Dak grinned. "Watch and learn, my friend," he said and started strolling toward the church.



The front face of the church loomed over them, towers dotted with arched windows rising on either side of the entrance. Once they were inside, everything was darker, the row of windows close to the ceiling letting in little of the morning's watery light. Already the nave was full of Parisians, many of them spilling into the transepts on either side of the altar.

Thankfully Dak, Sera, and Riq were dressed like everyone else so they didn't stand out so much. Dak used his small size to his advantage, slipping through the crowd toward the front of the church. At times like this it was useful to be young — no one seemed to pay him any attention.

When the contingent of Vikings entered, the crowded church grew so quiet that Dak could hear the rattle of swords in scabbards as the large Danish men strode forward. He was mesmerized. He'd seen depictions of Vikings from tapestries and drawings in his books, but seeing them in person was different. They were huge, with long mustaches braided out to their ears, and beards that fell from their chins.

He'd expected them to look more barbaric — everything he'd ever read about them mentioned their cruelty and filthiness — but these men didn't seem to match that description at all. In fact, they seemed cleaner and better dressed than most of the Parisians.

Their leader, Siegfried, was older than the others. Judging from the lines on his face, he'd probably never once smiled in his life. His cloak was pinned to his right shoulder, which kept his arm free — and even in the cathedral he kept his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Dak was pretty sure that the guy could lop off a head or a leg with one swing, his arms were so thick with muscles. Of course, that didn't stop Dak from edging closer to get a better look. Sera kept hissing at him to stop, but her unease didn't keep her from following as he made his way forward.

Just as they reached the edge of the crowd ringing the altar at the front of the cathedral, an old priest shuffled out of a side room and approached the band of Vikings. He was pretty weighed down with ornate robes that hung from his bony shoulders, and for a moment Dak wasn't sure he'd actually make it across the altar before keeling over. Flanking him were several other clergymen who seemed prepared to catch him if it came to that.

Siegfried stepped forward and spoke first. Dak's earpiece translated every word. "Bishop Gauzelin, have compassion on yourself and on your flock. Allow us the freedom of the city. We will do no harm, and we will see to it that whatever belongs to you shall be strictly protected."

Bishop Gauzelin turned to the priests around him and started to whisper as they debated Siegfried's request.

Dak felt his heart begin to race. "This is it," he whispered to Sera and Riq. "This is where the bishop hands over the city. And did you see what Siegfried is using to pin his cloak?" Dak tilted his head toward the gigantic Viking — whose bronze pin bore the unmistakable insignia of the SQ. "Man, sometimes I hate being right."

"I'm still not sure about this, Dak," Sera fretted. "I think we should figure out what the code from Brint and Mari says before jumping to any conclusions."

It bothered him that Sera had so little faith in him, especially since he'd never been wrong before. Oddly, Riq seemed willing to take his side, which was a rarity in itself. "Do you think that's really all there is to this Break? Keeping that Viking guy from getting into Paris?" Riq asked.

Dak rolled his eyes at Riq's imprecision with historical details. "He's not just 'some guy' and, yeah, I think keeping the bishop from handing over the city is a pretty good start. Siegfried is an agent of the SQ and his power base starts with Paris, so it makes sense to make sure that never happens. We just have to figure out how to do that."

"What if we just —" Riq started to offer.

Dak scoffed and cut him off. "I don't think learning about the origin of some obscure and useless word is what we need right now, and your skills are pretty limited beyond being a linguist."

Riq raised his eyebrows and glanced at Sera, who only shrugged in response. Dak shifted his focus back to the group gathering at the front of the church, trying to figure out how best to intervene.

His thoughts were interrupted by a smarting slap on the back. "Watch and learn, my friend," Riq said over his shoulder as he strode forward. The next thing Dak knew, Riq was leaping onto the dais.

Sera let out an alarmed little squeak as she tried to grab for Riq's tunic but she was too late. Soon enough Riq was approaching the flock of priests. "What's he doing?" she asked.

Dak shrugged; he didn't know, but whatever it was, he wasn't going to be left out. He was just about to climb up after him when Riq stepped between the two groups.

Siegfried looked Riq over dismissively, the furrows on his face deepening. "Who is this boy?"

Riq responded easily and smoothly, showing no fear or hesitation. "Bishop Gauzelin is not as skilled in the Danish tongue as I am and has allowed my assistance as a translator."

Siegfried frowned. One of the large men in his entourage stepped forward, a large red scar across his face puckering as he asked, "And how does one as dark as you come to know the Danish tongue?"

When Riq hesitated to answer the scarred Viking took another step until he was almost towering over the smaller boy. He had the same brutish look about him as the Time Warden they'd run into in Spain. Dak remembered

how they'd been caught in Palos de la Frontera during their first Break. The Time Warden overheard them talking just after they'd warped into 1492 and noticed how out of place the three of them looked in their stolen clothes and anachronistic demeanor.

Dak, Sera, and Riq were all too aware of the men and women who'd been trained throughout time to search for anything or anyone suspicious, and a dark-skinned teenager in medieval Paris who knew how to speak French, Latin, and Old Norse certainly qualified as odd. If Siegfried was SQ then it would make sense that one of his men might be a Time Warden, and the Time Warden's only job was to search out time travelers and eliminate them.

They couldn't risk getting caught and right now, getting caught looked likely. Sera gripped Dak's hand hard enough he was pretty sure she'd leave dents in his bones.

"Do something," she urged.

Dak's mind weeded through a myriad of historical details, searching out the best possible excuse for Riq. In the end, it didn't matter because Riq came up with his own solution: the truth. "My father was a scholar," Riq explained. "I speak sixteen languages."

He delivered the explanation with his usual air of smugness and though the scarred Viking opened his mouth as if to press the issue, Siegfried stepped forward, cutting him off. "Ignore Gorm. What is Bishop Gauzelin's response to our request?"

Dak's translator device switched smoothly to French again, and he overheard Gauzelin and Riq speaking back and forth, discussing their response. The bishop was clearly telling Riq to give in to the Viking demands.

Riq nodded in understanding and then turned to Siegfried. "Bishop Gauzelin tells me that Paris has been entrusted to us by the emperor. It is our responsibility to protect it."

Dak's jaw dropped and Sera frowned. "That's not what the bishop said," she whispered.

"Not at all," Dak agreed. He had absolutely no idea what Riq was planning.

Riq continued to talk, falsely translating what the bishop actually said. “If you had been given the duty of defending these walls, and if you instead gave in to the demands of a foreign army, what treatment do you think you would deserve?”

Siegfried laughed, a deep booming sound that echoed off the stone walls. “I would deserve to have my head cut off and thrown to the dogs.”

Riq crossed his arms over his chest and Dak was impressed with how imposing he looked among the massive Vikings and the frail priests. “So you understand our position and why we will not yield.”

Siegfried stepped forward until he was towering over Riq. In an instant he’d gone from laughter to fury. Sera’s grip on Dak’s hand tightened, something Dak didn’t even think was possible until he felt bones grinding together.

“If you do not bow to my demands,” Siegfried growled, “then tomorrow our war machines will destroy you.”

Riq grinned. “Bring it on.”

Dak almost groaned at the use of such a misdated phrase but it seemed to have the intended effect of catching Siegfried off guard. The Viking furrowed his brow in confusion before stepping back to join his men. “You’ve made your choice. Tomorrow face the wrath of Odin’s finest warriors.” Then they turned and strode from the hall, long cloaks billowing behind them.

The bishop appeared alarmed as he turned to Riq. “What did they say?”

“That we should be ready to fight,” Riq answered. It was clear he’d meant for no one beyond their small group to hear the words but even so his voice carried into the crowd. Soon there were strained murmurings that transformed quickly into a startled buzzing as the news made it through the throngs packed into the church. The air hummed with the threat of panic.

Sera finally released Dak’s hand, and he grimaced as blood rushed back into his fingertips with a feeling of pins and needles. “What did he just do?” she asked.

Dak stared up at where Riq and the bishop continued to converse. He couldn’t help but feel a little jealous of the older boy for taking such a crucial

role in changing the course of history. “I’m pretty sure he just started a war.”

He watched as Sera’s expression morphed from startled to alarmed. But it was envy, not the pending war, that occupied Dak’s thoughts. “Riq’s totally going to go down in the history books for this, isn’t he?”



## Another Fan of History

WHEN DAK told Sera there were over thirty thousand Vikings across the river, she hadn't really understood what that meant. Now that she was standing on top of the Grand Châtelet — the huge wooden tower on the mainland guarding the northern bridge to the island city — reality hit her. Hard.

Armored men spread out as far as the eye could see, covering the ground of the mainland's north bank more thickly than blades of grass. Even though dusk was falling fast she could see them milling around, setting up camp and sharpening weapons. In the distance, a large band of them hacked at a massive fallen tree with their axes, honing the tip of it to a point. Another group worked to set up what looked to be a complicated catapult.

It wouldn't be long until they pointed everything they had at the ancient wall ringing the island and let loose with all their might. Sera looked behind her into the city. The wall was old and crumbling, most of it constructed over four hundred years ago by the Romans (according to Dak). She couldn't imagine it holding up for long. Even worse, she'd counted maybe two hundred armed Parisian men during the day. Compared to the legion outside, their force was minuscule.

"You do realize that we're outnumbered, right?" she asked.

Riq glanced up briefly as if calculating. "If each man here personally takes down one hundred and fifty Vikings, we should be fine."



“One hundred and fifty heavily armed, bloodthirsty Vikings,” Dak clarified.

Sera stared at the two of them. Neither seemed to grasp the magnitude of the situation. “Oh, no sweat, then.”

Sera still felt uneasy at the way Riq had so completely twisted history. No matter how much Dak tried to reassure her that his read on their mission here was the right one, she didn’t like how little they knew about what was really going on. She was someone who preferred to amass facts, parse through them, and only then come up with a plan of action that had been considered from every angle.

All of this was happening too fast. The only thing that made Sera less anxious was that at the very least the Parisians now had a fighting chance. Originally, according to Dak, after the bishop handed over the city, the Vikings had waited through the night to lull everyone into a false sense of security before destroying the island in the morning. Now, because of Riq, the Parisians had fair warning and were able to marshal their forces and make a plan for defending themselves.

It was an old plan, actually. A few decades before, King Charles the Bald had ordered that cities along the Seine build low bridges across the river to keep Vikings from being able to sail inland too easily. But the bridges themselves were vulnerable to attack. Towers were supposed to be constructed to protect the bridges.

A lot of cities had started the fortifications but never really finished them. Because of that, there was nothing to keep the agile Viking ships from sailing inland from the sea, and they’d taken advantage of this, sending out raids that had decimated French cities that lay close to the coast.

Paris hadn’t finished its fortifications either, and now that the Vikings were set to attack, everyone was pitching in to hurriedly build another level on the tower guarding the north bridge.

*I guess procrastination isn’t a modern invention,* Sera thought darkly. She had suggested finding a quiet spot for the three of them to hole up in while they worked on the encoded information on the Square. But before they’d

had a chance to sneak off, the bishop had asked Riq personally to help out. That's what he got for jumping in as a translator — he'd become too high profile to fade into the background.

Which meant now Sera was tasked with holding rough-hewn wooden planks while Riq and Dak hammered them into place. It wasn't enough of a distraction from the intimidating view, and her mind drifted back to the danger lurking way too close for comfort.

"I'm still not convinced this can work," she said. "Even with the advance warning, I don't see how so few men will keep the Vikings from taking over."

Dak didn't even stop what he was doing as he responded, "Originally, they didn't. The Vikings creamed the Parisians and pretty much took everything they could get their hands on before claiming the city as their base of power and moving on to conquer more."

Sera glanced at Riq, wondering if Dak's answer was as unsettling for him as it was for her. But Riq seemed engrossed in his task and perfectly willing to ignore both of them. "And you think we've changed all that?"

Dak paused. "Maybe?" That his answer was in the form of a question didn't do much to allay Sera's fears.

"On the plus side," Dak added, "at least now we get to see how a battering ram works." He grinned in his familiar way.

"That's not really something I would put in the *plus* category," Sera muttered.

Dak ignored her. "Speaking of how things work," Dak continued. "As soon as it's dark I'm going to sneak down to the riverbank so I can check out one of the longships. I want to see firsthand if the re-creation at the Smithsonian was accurate."

Sera felt her eyes bulge out of her head. "What?" The word came out almost as a squawk and several heads turned her way, causing her to blush. She lowered her voice and gripped Dak's shoulder. "You're not leaving this tower, Dak Smyth!"

"It'll just be for a second," he argued. "I'll be careful, I promise. Everyone up here is focused on getting the tower fortified, and all the Vikings are

wrapped up in their preparations for tomorrow. No one will notice me, honest.”

Was Dak crazy? He'd done some reckless things in his life, but Sera couldn't believe he was actually considering leaving the safety of the tower, and alone at that!

“It's out of the question,” she told him, and for the briefest flash of a moment she felt the dizzy, uneven sensation that preceded a Remnant. She'd had these feelings before — that her life was somehow missing something that she was brushing right up against — but they'd always happened when she was at home near her barn or when she looked in a mirror.

This time there was something about the phrase she'd just said, her tone of voice and inflection, that felt as though it should have been familiar somehow. She pressed a hand against the wall to steady herself, sweat breaking out along her temples. Dak didn't seem to notice. Or if he did he must have thought she was just upset at his plan to sneak out (which, for the record, she was).

“Listen, Sera,” Dak said, setting down his tools and facing her, “when I snuck you into my parents' super-secure workshop and you saw all those whiteboards filled with their plans for the Infinity Ring, I didn't try to stop you from working on it. In fact, if I remember correctly I even brought you a nice ham sandwich.”

Dak knew exactly how to make Sera feel guilty and, since she was already unsteady in the wake of the passing Remnant, it was difficult for her to come up with a good response. So she settled on “That was different.”

“How?”

“Because there weren't thirty thousand Vikings nearby ready to kill you!” Once again Sera's outburst drew the attention of the workers around them, and this time several narrowed their eyes.

Dak stepped forward and put a hand on her arm. Sera knew as soon as he did it that she'd lost the argument.

“I promise I'll be careful,” he said. His eyes were pleading and his voice earnest. “You know how important this is to me. My entire life I've lived and

breathed history, and now's my chance to actually experience it firsthand. Please, Sera."

Dak was right; he'd let her play around in his parents' lab even though he knew he'd be in huge trouble if they'd found out. He'd taken the risk because of how much it meant to Sera. She sighed dramatically and Dak flashed her an enormous grin.

"One boat, that's it," she told him sternly. "And first, we figure out how to find the Hystorian. That's most important."

Dak's response was a groan. "But those puzzles are so hard! And when we asked about a roofless inn, everyone looked at us like we were crazy!"

She arched an eyebrow, a skill she'd perfected after spending several hours in front of the bathroom mirror. "Then I guess you won't get to see your boat tonight."

Dak buried his head in his hands and Riq slapped him on the back. "Get to work," he said, almost gleeful at Dak's despair.



As it turned out, while Sera was a whiz at calculations and really complicated machines that required using tiny precise instruments, she wasn't all that skilled at constructing fortress walls. Finally, after she'd gotten in the way one too many times, the bishop suggested that a better task for her might be running messages back and forth between the two defensive towers guarding the bridges on either side of the island.

She was just crossing through the center of the city on her way back north when someone fell into step next to her. She glanced over to find a teen boy, probably not much older than her, with closely cropped hair and an angular face. Immediately her guard went up — she recognized him as someone who'd been hovering around Riq, Dak, and her for much of the day, never far out of earshot.

"Lovely night," he said, and she grunted in response. That didn't keep him from trying to engage her in conversation. "I don't believe we've met before. Have you been in Paris long? Where are you from?"

It was a lot of questions for one stranger to ask another, and Sera waved her hand in the air. “Here and there,” she answered noncommittally as she picked up her pace.

The boy sped up as well. “I was born here, but my family’s from Northumbria in Britain. Lindisfarne, actually. Have you heard of it?”

Sera cut a glare at him. She didn’t really care where he was from and she didn’t know why he kept talking to her.

Nevertheless, he pushed on. “My great-great-great-uncle was a monk there. At Lindisfarne Priory. He’s who I’m named after, actually. Oh, I never did introduce myself properly. I’m Billfrith.” He paused, clearly waiting for her to introduce herself, but she kept quiet — and kept moving. But the boy didn’t take the hint.

“I guess not that many people have heard of Lindisfarne Priory these days, which is really a shame. During its time it was a great place of learning. The monks specialized in history, with a keen interest in Aristotle and his pupil Alexander.”

This got Sera’s attention, and she stopped abruptly. Her mind whirred over the riddle from the Square: “Upset the clue within: . . . Find a roofless inn.” She began playing with the letters, “upsetting” their order until she found a new arrangement. Suddenly, “find a roofless inn” morphed into “son of Lindisfarne.”

She sucked in a breath. “Wait, what was that last bit?”

Billfrith had to double back. “My ancestors were monks at Lindisfarne Priory, which was once the greatest library in the world. They’d collected more information about Aristotle than anyone else. The priory was destroyed in a raid by the Danes over a century ago, and my great-great-great-uncle was the only one who survived. He’s passed down everything he knew. Everyone in my family is quite the, ah, *historian*.” He smiled. “Including me.”



## A Secret Breach

DAK KNEW Sera would be furious, but that didn't stop him from sneaking from the north tower and slipping into the darkness of the mainland. It had been ages since Sera had gone to deliver a message to the south tower, and Dak had no idea how much longer the darkness would last; they'd had to ditch their watches after their first time warp so they wouldn't look suspicious. He still hadn't gotten used to telling time by the movement of the stars or sun, and he wasn't willing to risk losing the chance to check out the Viking ships firsthand.

Besides, Sera had left the SQuare with him and he had it tucked into a satchel slung across his shoulder, so technically he was still trying to work out the code they'd found earlier. He just wasn't doing it at that exact moment.

Escaping Riq's notice was easy once the older boy began nodding off as the night stretched on. And since the tower was situated on the mainland, he didn't have to risk crossing the bridge and getting noticed. Really, all he needed to do was not appear suspicious. He'd learned a long time ago that if you looked like you belonged, people tended to ignore you. It worked just as well in the ninth century as it had in the twenty-first.

November in Paris turned out to be pretty cold once he was away from the light and warmth of the tower, and the clothes Riq had found weren't all that warm. Dak shivered as he felt his way across the deep trough ringing the

tower. Behind him, in the middle of the river, shadows paced back and forth along the wall around Paris, soldiers keeping an eye on the Viking camps.

Dak scrambled upriver, a long black stretch of water lapping softly along muddy banks to his left. A thin sheet of frost crackled under his feet as he slipped his way through fields and between the few houses and churchyards that had been built across from the island.

Even from here he sensed the fear of the coming morning radiating from the city, and this caused him to pause. He remembered catching a glimpse into one of the houses in Paris as he'd walked by earlier in the evening. He'd seen a father pull a young boy onto his lap, brushing frightened tears from his son's eyes. At the memory, something tightened inside Dak, making it harder to breathe as he thought about his own father, now lost in time. Sera theorized that his parents were being drawn to the Breaks and that eventually they'd find one another again, but Dak wasn't so sure.

In one swift moment Dak felt the enormity of the task the Hystorians had given the three of them and how easily it could all go wrong. For his entire life, the two things he'd always been sure of were his parents' love for him and his knowledge of history.

Now his parents were missing and history was changing.

Dak looked back at the north tower and thought about turning around. Sera would be worried. But then he felt the inescapable tug of the Viking ships moored up the river. It would only take a minute or two for him to scurry down and take a look. With the Vikings themselves encamped farther inland, he would never have a better opportunity.

Firsthand knowledge of Viking artifacts was rare in his time, and the thought of returning home and being able to straighten the record was too tempting an opportunity to pass up.

Dak hoped Sera had nodded off like Riq, but just in case he sent a silent apology over his shoulder and made his way quickly to the ships. They towered over him. The boat they'd seen (and almost been crushed by) during their class trip to the Smithsonian paled in comparison to the real thing. Dak reached out and pressed a hand against one of the hulls. The wood was

smooth, painted in bright reds and blues, and without any blemishes or knots. Holes dotted the sides where oars could be set for rowing, and the prow curved into the form of a sinister-looking dragon's head.

Dak had told himself he'd just take a quick look and leave, but that was impossible. It wasn't enough to glance at the hull; he had to climb inside and sit on the benches and wrap his hands around a set of oars. Above him sails wound tight around spars attached to a forest of masts and he imagined the color of them all unfurled: red, yellow, white, blue, green.

He was so lost in his daydream that he didn't hear the crunch of approaching feet across the frosty bank. All Dak knew was that one minute he was standing on the prow of a Viking ship imagining all kinds of seafaring adventures, and the next he was flat on his back.

Pinning him to the deck was the largest beast Dak had seen in his entire life. It had paws the size of cement blocks resting on either side of Dak's ribs. But all Dak could really focus on was the monster's head, its mouth a cavern of sharp teeth. The animal panted a hot breath against Dak's face that stank of something truly horrid. When it growled, the entire boat vibrated.

This wasn't exactly the way Dak had imagined his life ending, but there was little he could do to defend himself. Instead he tried a little diplomacy.

"Nice doggie," he cooed. "Who's a good boy?"

This only caused the beast to draw its tongue over its lips in anticipation.

"Sit?" Dak tried again. The dog tilted its head to the side, as one long string of thick drool slid from its mouth and came within millimeters of Dak's cheek.

What Dak heard next almost scared him more than the beast pinning him to the deck. It was a low booming that sounded more like thunder than a man's laughter. The largest human being Dak had seen in his entire life leaned into the boat, causing it to tip precariously.

When the man spoke, Dak's earpiece immediately switched languages to translate. As soon as he heard the words, Dak thought that perhaps it would have been better if he'd been left in ignorance.



“Well, Vígi,” the giant said, surveying the situation. “It seems like you found your own dinner after all.”



Sera couldn't stop pacing. “Where is he?” She'd asked the question a million times before and she knew that Riq didn't have an answer, but that didn't stop her from repeating herself. She couldn't *believe* Dak had just snuck out without telling anyone. They'd had an agreement: First they'd find the Hystorian, then he could look at one Viking ship. (And while technically she'd found the Hystorian, Dak hadn't known that, which meant he'd totally broken the rule.)

Already the sky was lightening, which meant that at any minute the Vikings would begin attacking the city. She couldn't bear the thought of Dak out there alone. She sat and put her head in her hands. “I'm going to kill him,” she muttered, but her threat was halfhearted.

What would she do if she lost him for good?

She shivered and pushed the thought from her mind. Thankfully, she had something else to focus on. “Okay, Billfirth,” she said, turning to the Hystorian.

“Billfrith,” he corrected.

She frowned. “That's what I said.”

“No,” Riq corrected. “You said *-firth*, not *-frith*.”

She took a deep breath before finally suggesting, “How about I just call you Bill?” He smiled back at her, which she took to be his consent.

“So,” Sera continued. “Now that we've found you, you can tell us what we're supposed to be doing here, right?”

Bill looked uneasily between the two of them. “I can tell you historically what's led us to this point, but I can't tell you what the Break is or how it was, or will be, caused. That's something that can only be determined from the future — after it's happened.”

Sera reached to tug on her hair, a habit to ease frustration, but then she remembered that it had mostly been cut off during their first time warp.

Instead she sighed and placed her hands in her lap.

“Seems we’ve exchanged one useless history buff for another,” Riq grumbled.

Sera shot him a pointed look. “Mari and Brint wouldn’t have told us to find Hystorians if they didn’t think we’d need the help.”

“I’m not questioning whether we need the help,” Riq countered. “I’m questioning whether this kid is going to be able to provide it.”

Sera saw Bill frown at being called a kid, and her cheeks flushed a bit with embarrassment at how rude Riq was being.

“I *can* tell you that there’s an SQ contingent within the Viking ranks,” Bill said. “That’s useful information.”

“We already figured that out,” Riq snapped.

Sera had had enough. “Hey, we all have the same goal here — how about we work together?”

Riq’s only response was to frown and pace to a narrow opening in the tower wall. They were all feeling on edge. They’d already meddled with the path of history, and none of them knew what the effects of that would be. During the night the Parisians had been able to make the north tower taller by half, but it didn’t seem possible that it would be enough to stave off the impending Viking attack.

She’d just turned back to Bill to ask him more about what he knew when Riq drew in a sharp breath. When he looked at them his face was grim. “Well, the good news is, I’ve found Dak. The bad news is, so have the Vikings.”



## Rollo the Walker

THE MASSIVE dog drew its tongue up the length of Dak's face as if giving him a taste. If Dak had thought the creature's breath was bad, its drool was even worse. He tried to hold his own breath against the stench of it. "Please don't eat me," he squeaked.

The giant leaning over the edge of the boat laughed. "Enough, Vígi," he commanded. "This one's too scrawny for a meal." The dog huffed before jumping off Dak and landing by its master's side.

Dak sat up, wiping at his cheek. "Ugh, what do you feed that thing? Molded cheese? And I don't mean the good kind, like a nice Roquefort."

The man looked at Dak meaningfully. "Sometimes. When we can't find Franks to satisfy her appetite."

The response caused Dak to swallow nervously. Did the Viking think Dak was an enemy scout? Best to play dumb, he decided. "Uh, no Parisians here, though. Maybe we can find one for her?" He stood and began making his way aft to climb down, keeping as far away from the Viking — and his dog — as possible.

Apparently, the Viking wasn't ready for Dak to leave, because he shoved the edge of the boat into the water, causing the deck to pitch and Dak to fall against one of the benches. "Yet you speak French as well as you speak my

people’s tongue.” When Dak began to deny this the man added, “I heard you speaking to Vígi when I approached.”

Dak remembered the excuse Riq used earlier and tried it out. “I like languages. I’m kind of a collector of them, you might say.”

Apparently, this Viking wasn’t as gullible as the others. He pursed his lips. “Like the bishop’s translator, *hmm?* Any other language scholars in the area I should know about?”

Dak shook his head. The less he said, the better. For all he knew, the Viking standing in front of him could be SQ — maybe even a Time Warden, in which case Dak was totally hosed. He needed to get back to the tower or, better yet, inside the walls of the city itself.

“Well, it was good talking but I should probably go. . . .”

Dak had just thrown a leg over the side of the boat and was sliding toward the shore when the Viking caught him in midair. With one hand. Dak’s struggles were fruitless — the man’s hand was so huge it almost circled his entire waist.

“No need to scamper off,” the man boomed. “You entertain me. I think I’ll keep you longer; you look useful. And if it turns out you’re not, you can be Vígi’s new toy. I think she’s taken a liking to you.”

Hearing her name, Vígi pulled her lips back from her teeth. Dak couldn’t tell if the dog was grinning or just showing Dak how close he’d come to being dinner (and how such a possibility still wasn’t entirely out of the question).

Something sharp dug into Dak’s hip and he realized that it was the edge of the Square. If the Vikings got ahold of that, he really would be in massive trouble. There was no way he could come up with an explanation for that sort of thing.

His mind spun frantically, trying to figure out what to do. The Viking released his grip to place Dak upon the ship’s edge, and Dak took that moment to drop his satchel onto the deck of the ship, behind one of the large round shields set along the hull. It was hidden from plain view, but not particularly well.

With a deep sense of unease, Dak allowed himself to fall to the ground. When he found himself face-to-face with the Viking's belly button, he realized just how huge the guy was.

"Rollo the Walker," the man said, thumping a massive fist against his chest.

Dak scrunched his face up in confusion. "Walker?"

The Viking grinned hugely. "On account of there not being any horse large enough to carry a man as big as me. Who are you?"

"Dak," he answered. It seemed like Rollo expected more. "Uh, Dak the, er . . . Cheese Eater?"

That earned another bellowing laugh from the giant. "We'll see what we can scrounge up for you back at camp, then. There may be some headcheese left if you're lucky."

Dak's stomach growled at the mere mention of his favorite food. "I've never heard of that one," he said, his mouth already watering. "Is it goat cheese or cow?"

"Cow." Rollo began walking away from the river, toward the burning fire pits spread across the countryside.

Dak wasn't about to let him get far when there was cheese to discuss. "Are we talking something hard, like Parmesan, or softer, like a nice creamy Brie?"

Rollo glanced at him with an odd expression. "I'd probably describe it as 'squishy,' but then I like to leave the eyes and brain in. Otherwise you're just left with flesh, tongue, and maybe some heart, and where's the texture in that?"

"What? Why would you . . . ?" Dak couldn't even finish the thought — his stomach was too busy turning over. "Eyes? Brain? How could you ruin cheese like that?"

Rollo's smile was huge and showed a few too many teeth for Dak's comfort. "*Headcheese*, I said. It's like a meat jelly made from the head of a cow. I'll give you a taste when we get to camp."

Rollo gestured for Dak to get moving.

“Wait!” Alarmed, Dak glanced back at the north tower. Behind it a strip of hazy light began to creep up the horizon. It wouldn’t be long before the battle started. “I was just thinking that I’d scout out around the Parisian defenses, maybe see if there are any weaknesses for you to exploit in the morning. You know what they say, a prepared Viking is a . . . er . . . prepared.”

He tried to smile, but even Vígi whuffed in disdain.

Rollo leaned down until his face was right in front of Dak’s. “Let me be blunt. You intrigue me, but that doesn’t mean I trust you. I still haven’t made up my mind if you’re friend or foe, and I like to keep both close at hand. Either way, you’re not getting out of my sight. Try, and I’ll have to send my best warrior out after you.” He set his hand on Vígi’s head, indicating just who his best warrior was. “And she is not known for her mercy.”



## War Machines

SERA STARED out the window at where Dak cowered in the shadow of a massive Viking. Her heart pounded heavily in her chest, and her voice had an edge of panic. “We need to go out after him.”

She’d already started for the tower stairs when Riq put his hand on her shoulder. “We have a job to do, Sera,” he said. “If we go out there and get captured, how are we going to fix the Break?”

“He needs our help,” she snapped at him, but Riq still didn’t let her go. Sera closed her eyes, trying to find patience, but there was nothing left. She didn’t understand how he could be hesitating. It was *Dak* out there beyond the fortress walls, and he clearly needed their help.

“I think there’s a bigger problem you two are forgetting,” Bill suggested.

Sera glared at him. “I *know* what we’re supposed to be doing,” she snapped. “But sometimes saving your best friend is more important than saving the world!”

“What about saving yourself?” he asked.

Sera frowned, not understanding. Bill pointed out the window. “I’d say we have about five, maybe ten minutes before the Vikings attack us with everything they’ve got. And what they’ve got is a whole lot more force than we have.”

She didn't want to, but Sera peeked out the window facing the mainland. What she saw made her head spin. In the few moments she'd spent arguing, the Vikings had rolled massive wooden contraptions into view. She had no idea what they were, but she had a sinking suspicion that she'd find out soon enough.

Bill joined her by the window. "Ballistae," he said. "War machines they'll use to fling huge stones. And that's just their opening move."

"We have to do something," she whispered.

Riq and Bill exchanged glances. "There's only one thing we really can do," Bill offered.

Sera sighed, already fearing the answer. "And what's that?"

Riq held out a bow and a quiver of arrows as if she'd have any idea how to use them. "We have to fight."

In the distance Sera heard the first Viking war horn begin to blow. It was followed by another and another until the air was swollen with the sound of them. "But what if we fail? What if the Vikings take Paris after all?"

Once again Bill glanced at Riq, and Sera was pretty sure there was some sort of silent communication between them that she wasn't a part of. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that," he finally said as the first of the Viking catapults let loose with a barrage of stones and arrows.



Rollo had shoved Dak into a tent, set Vígi at the entrance to guard him, and then traipsed off to the battlefield. Dak protested as much as he could — not only did he absolutely have to get back to Sera, but he also wasn't keen on the idea of completely missing the battle. That just wasn't fair!

At first Dak tried to sneak past Vígi, but even when she seemed in the deepest sleep (as indicated by ear-shattering snores), the moment Dak reached for the tent flap she'd leap to her feet and growl so loud he felt the air hum.

In the end, he came up with a foolproof plan. Vígi was just like every other dog he'd ever known: Give her a solid ten minutes of scratching behind the ears and she'd pledge her life to you. In fact, his plan to win her over



worked too well — she tried to follow him out onto the battlefield several times until he finally had to find a length of rope and tie her to a support pole in the tent.

“Sorry, girl,” he said, giving her a good rub under the chin when she looked up at him mournfully. “I don’t want you getting hurt,” he added. Her expression seemed to ask, “What about you?” which was a question Dak didn’t want to think about.

He’d found a pair of pants and a slightly flared wool tunic and had exchanged his Frankish clothes so that he’d blend in easier with the Viking horde. It seemed to work, because as he walked through the camp no one paid him any mind. From there it was just a matter of following the sounds of battle.

Dak figured he had read more about war than anyone he knew. He’d memorized casualty lists and studied time lines of weapons development and learned battle strategy, and until this moment he’d have called himself an expert.

But real war was nothing like the accounts he’d read in books. First, there was the noise — it was so much louder than he’d ever expected. Men shouted commands, trebuchets launched piles of stones, and ballistae shot javelins into the air; horns blared and church bells rang. Then there were the smells: smoke from fires set against the walls around the city, blood from open wounds, the earthy stench of mud and sweat.

His fingers itched for his Square diary to record it all with. In his mind he imagined returning home, sharing his firsthand account, and becoming a famous historian. He’d be a world-renowned expert and when he opened his mouth to share random bits of history, people would listen without laughing or rolling their eyes.

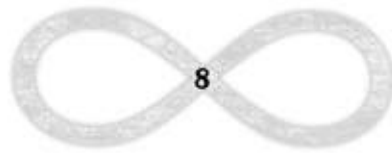
Just as his daydream culminated with him walking across the stage to receive the Nobel Prize, he was interrupted by harsh reality.

“You, boy!” someone shouted angrily. Dak glanced over his shoulder, attempting to look innocent. He recognized the Viking who was approaching him. It was one of the men who’d accompanied Siegfried into the chapel the

previous morning — the one named Gorm, with the bright red scar slashing from eyebrow to chin, who had seemed suspicious of Riq’s ability to speak both Old Norse and French. “Don’t you think you’re a little out of time?” he asked Dak now.

The question sounded harmless enough, but Dak grasped its double meaning. Gorm knew Dak wasn’t supposed to be there, that he was from another century.

Which meant that Dak was in big trouble if Gorm got his hands on him. So Dak ran — right into the heart of the battlefield.



## Under Attack

SERA WATCHED the first bombardment of stones in wonder. So many projectiles filled the air that it was almost impossible to see the sky. It wasn't until Bill shoved her away from the tower's window and crouched over her that she truly understood what was about to happen.

Or rather, what had just begun. The tower shuddered under the onslaught. Stones splintered walls. Arrows zinged through the open window, embedding in the wooden floor by her feet.

"We have to find someplace safe!" Riq shouted, and they crawled toward the stairs. A sea of Franks pushed against them, racing toward the top of the tower to take up defensive positions. The men wore battle dress: thickly padded tunics and metal helmets. Some carried swords and shields, and others had bows and arrows. Just looking at them made Sera feel more vulnerable in her simple woolen tunic.

"This way," Bill urged, taking her elbow and pulling her into a narrow, dark corridor. She'd only taken a few steps when she heard Riq grunt behind her. She turned to find him being pulled in the opposite direction by a large Frankish soldier.

"Only two hundred men on this side of the river to defend the tower," the soldier said, shoving a wicked-looking sword into Riq's hands. His wrist bent

awkwardly under the weight of it. “We need all the manpower we can get.” He began dragging Riq up the stairs.

“Wait!” Sera called out. She swallowed and tried to keep her voice from shaking. “I’ll help, too,” she offered. She’d already been separated from Dak; she couldn’t lose Riq as well. Behind her, Bill hissed for her to be quiet.

The soldier squinted at her as if seriously considering her offer and then scoffed. “You should be back across the river with the other children. What you’re still doing here I don’t know, but you’re well and trapped now.” He nudged Riq toward the staircase where he was swallowed up by the rush of men. “You want to help?” the man asked. “Stay out of our way.” And then he, too, was gone.

Sera tried to run after them but Bill kept his hand tight around her arm. “He’s right, Sera,” he said, but she didn’t want to hear it. She felt like she was losing complete control of everything. Dak’s role was to use his historical knowledge to figure out the Breaks and how to fix them. Riq’s job was to make sure they could always communicate with those around them. That left Sera, whose only contribution was to make sure the Infinity Ring warped them to the right place and time. And even that wasn’t so complicated that Dak or Riq couldn’t figure it out if they needed to.

Which meant that Sera’s real responsibility was keeping the three of them together. They’d been in 885 for less than twenty-four hours and she’d already failed. Miserably.

As if sensing how upset Sera was, Bill gently squeezed her arm. “He’ll be okay,” he said. “They both will.”

Sera shook her head. “How can you know? Everything about history has already changed, thanks to us, and we don’t know if it’s for the better or worse.”

He took her hand in his, which felt a little awkward at first until they sorted their fingers out. “From my point of view, I can definitely say it’s changed for the better,” he said softly, causing Sera to blush.

She really wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Ever since they’d left home, she’d been so focused on fixing the Breaks that it never occurred to her to

think about how their meddling with history affected those they met along the way. She thought about the first Hystorian they'd met, Gloria the butcher, and how her eyes had grown wide when they told her about airplanes and men on the moon. Did she then spend the rest of her life dreaming about such things, or did she go about her ordinary duties as if she'd never met three kids from the future?

Just then, there was a tremendous crashing sound. A few stones fell from the ceiling and shattered at her feet. A long crack snaked up the wall, letting in a slice of sunlight and the sound of men shouting and swords clashing. Another jolt jarred the tower, and Sera and Bill stumbled as they tried to catch their footing.

"It isn't safe here," Bill shouted at her over the din of battle. "Follow me." And then he was leading her through the dim corridor, his hand still holding hers tightly.

They passed a few narrow slits in the walls that Bill explained were arrow loops, meant to allow men inside to fire arrows on anyone attacking. As they passed by each one, Sera snuck glances outside, trying to catch glimpses of the battle. Hundreds of ships lined the river, each one stuffed with men wearing chain mail and helmets, waving swords or shooting at the tower with bows and arrows. All of them moved toward the bridge, disgorging their cargo of soldiers on the nearby shore. Here they joined others digging at the foundation of the tower with pickaxes and shovels, trying to tunnel under the thick wall.

Along the northern bank more Vikings prepped trebuchets and catapults, lobbing stones and flaming pots of oil over the walls of the fortified city. The sky was thick with projectiles, the air dingy with smoke and loud with shouting and screaming. Church bells rang and Viking horns blew as if the two sides could war with sound alone.

Bill drew her through a tight passage into a tiny circular room with a high domed ceiling. "It's an old turret," he said. "They changed the design of the tower after this room was built, and most people forget about it. We should be

safe here for a while. At least until the bridge clears enough for us to sneak back to the city.”

Narrow gaps were spread along the wall at knee height and Sera pressed her face against one. “Murder holes,” Bill explained. He pointed out how the sides of the holes flared out at steep angles, narrowing the view. “Men can kneel here and shoot crossbows, picking off soldiers outside, but it’s almost impossible to get an arrow back in.”

He leaned against one of the walls and slid until he was sitting. His legs took up a good portion of the floor space, so that Sera had to sit with her knees tucked against her chest. She could still feel the floor trembling beneath her as stones struck the tower. Even though it meant watching the ravaging forces attacking them, she couldn’t help but look outside, trying to catch a glimpse of Dak.

She hoped he was smart enough to keep far, far away from the battlefield. But she also knew him well enough to be pretty sure he’d never stay away from the center of action. “Please don’t be stupid,” she murmured to herself.

As if on cue, her eye caught on a small figure darting through the throng of Vikings. Sera had been in enough PE classes with Dak to recognize his awkward gait as he ducked behind a pile of discarded bloody shields.

“Dak!” she cried out, banging her hand against the wall. But all she could do was watch, and hope none of the flying debris — from either side — would hit her friend.

This wasn’t like dodgeball (a game that Dak never excelled at) — these flying balls could kill!

A single shield detached itself from the pile and started moving haltingly across the battlefield. The wooden circle was huge, at least as tall as Dak, and he teetered under the weight of it. A band of Vikings streamed around him, racing toward the tower with bloodcurdling shouts and roars, but one of them must have knocked into Dak because he tripped and went sprawling.

Just as he started to push himself up, a massive bolt shot from the tower and tore through the air. It barely grazed Dak’s head before skewering seven Vikings who’d been running along behind him.

From somewhere above she heard men cheering as one of them shouted, “Tell the kitchens we have a human kabob for them to cook!”

Sera cried out as the men staggered and then fell. Dak’s face went white with shock and he crouched, seemingly frozen, completely out in the open where anyone could take aim at him.

She heard someone screaming and realized belatedly that it was her, calling Dak’s name and telling him to move.



## Bearing the Standard

DAK COULDN'T move. The bolt had come so close to his head he could swear it had created a new part in his hair. He heard the sickening sound of the sharp metal tip striking the Vikings who'd been running behind him and then the grunt as they collapsed. Dark red blood seeped from their chests, turning the ground around them to a scarlet mud.

The reality of where he was and what he was doing struck him like a battering ram against a fortress gate. He was unarmed and unarmored in the middle of a chaotic battlefield. On the positive side, he'd put some distance between himself and Gorm. But getting killed now wouldn't be helping anyone, least of all himself.

For the briefest moment the violence around him paused, and he thought he heard someone scream his name. He stared up at the tower only a hundred yards away, trying to seek out a familiar face. It was useless, and he knew it. Riq and Sera would be safe inside the island fortress by now — far, far away from the danger of battle.

But then he thought he heard that same voice shout for him to move. He didn't even question where the command came from. Instead, he just obeyed, tucking into a ball and rolling sharply to his left.

An arrow whizzed through the air with a high-pitched whine, striking the shield underneath Dak with a solid *thwunk*. Two inches to the left and it



would have speared his shoulder.

That's all it took to get Dak to his feet and sprinting back toward the Viking camp — facing Gorm seemed like the better option at the moment. As he ran he cut from right to left to make himself a more difficult target. He'd just crested a low hill when he saw a line of Vikings — hundreds of them — racing for the battlefield, their shields held over their heads to protect themselves from the rain of stones and arrows.

It was pretty clear pretty fast that Dak would be trampled to death if he kept going. He had no option but to pivot on his heel and run along with them, letting himself get caught up in their roaring energy. Tucked among the massive bodies and huge round shields, Dak felt nearly safe.

It was almost as if he were one of them.

As they approached the tower the sound of stones hitting shields became as deafening as the screaming around him. A reed-thin boy holding a tall pole with a pennant streaming from the top grinned at Dak as they ran alongside each other. Dak had just started to smile back when the boy's eyes went wide and his teeth turned a pinkish red. When he fell to his knees, Dak saw a thick spear protruding from between his shoulder blades.

Horrified, Dak took a step forward — his instinct was to offer help even though he knew there was nothing he could do. The boy said nothing, just held out the pole, shoving it into Dak's hands before collapsing. Dak stood there, his hands gripping the pole, no idea what to do next.

One of the other Vikings must have seen the look of terror and confusion on Dak's face, because he slapped his back in what was probably meant to be a reassuring gesture but ended up sending a jolt of pain through him.

“You're the standard-bearer now, boy.” He gestured up at the flag. “That's Siegfried's seal there. Upon your life, you cannot let it fall. Best watch yourself — holding it makes you a target. The Franks would do anything to get that flag as proof of victory.”

And then the man was off, and Dak was left in the middle of battle staring up at the scrap of cloth hanging limply from the top of the pole. A sluggish bit of breeze found its way to him, lifting the flag so that he could see the banner

clearly. If his heart wasn't already frozen in fear, it would have sprouted icicles.

He recognized the symbol Siegfried used for his standard. He'd seen it before on the lapels of Tilda the Lady in Red, etched into the belt buckles of the Amancio brothers, and scraped into a wall in 1792 Paris. It was the symbol of the SQ, and it was apparently now Dak's responsibility to protect it.



“What in the name of mincemeat is Dak thinking?” Sera groaned. She and Bill knelt side by side, staring out the murder hole to where Dak stood, holding a flag that lifted in the meager breeze. “He’s just made himself a target!”

Beside her, Bill tensed and cursed under his breath, using a word the device in her ear refused to translate.

“What is it?” she asked, dread already pooling in her stomach.

“I recognize the emblem on that standard,” he said. “It’s the symbol of the men who attacked Lindisfarne.”

Sera frowned. “The symbol of the SQ. That’s why we’re here — Siegfried is SQ, and we have to stop him from amassing power.”

Bill pressed his face against the hole again and spoke as she did the same. “It’s not just that one banner I’m worried about. It’s all the others.”

Sera let her eyes roam across the battlefield. Now that she was looking for something other than Dak, she realized that half the men bore some form of the SQ symbol. It was carved into helmets, painted on the hulls of ships, even woven into the cloaks thrown over Viking shoulders.

“They’re everywhere,” she said in shock.

Bill turned until he was facing her and she could feel the warm puffs of his breath against her cheek. “Is there any way they could know that you’re here?”

She shook her head. “No, not unless . . .” She caught herself just as she was about to mention Dak. She knew he wouldn’t have said anything to give

the three of them away. Then she remembered the Viking who'd accompanied Siegfried to the cathedral — the one with the scar across his face.

“There was one of Siegfried's men that seemed like he might have been suspicious. Why?”

Bill leaned back against the wall, his hands worrying along the edge of his dagger. “You represent a threat to the power it's taken the SQ eleven centuries to amass. If they even suspect there's someone from the future behind these walls, they'll stop at nothing to get to you.”

Sera looked back at the battlefield. There were soldiers for as far as she could see. Individually they were like drops of water that combined to create a massive ocean. “How can we hope to fight so many?”

Bill hesitated before answering, which, Sera was coming to realize, was never a good sign.

“I think you have to face the possibility that Paris might fall,” he said at last. “And if that happens, you have no choice but to warp out of here and keep the Infinity Ring from falling into SQ control.”



## Taking a Dive

DAK SPENT most of the next few hours trying to avoid getting killed, which wasn't as easy as it sounded. Even though the Franks were wildly outnumbered, they had the benefit of thick walls between them and the Vikings. Plus, they were fighting to defend their homes, which made them especially formidable.

To make his task of staying alive (and in one piece) even more difficult, Dak wore no armor and carried no weapons. He just had the stupid flag, which meant he couldn't sneak away either. Every time he tried to hand it off to someone else he was met with hearty slaps on the back and congratulations for making it as long as he had. Apparently, standard-bearer was a very short-term gig with a high mortality rate.

The only benefit to his position was that he had plenty of time to race around the fortifications, searching for a way inside. He knew that trying to use force would be useless — if thirty thousand Vikings couldn't break down the wall, what hope did an eleven-year-old boy have?

His only chance would be to use his brain, which was overflowing with tales of fortresses being taken in various ways. His favorite had always been the story of Château Gaillard, a supposedly impenetrable medieval castle. Among its many features was an extra bathroom built in the chapel. Following the orders of King John of England, a little room had been

constructed so that it hung off the side of the building, with a hole in the floor. It's what passed for luxury in those days.

When the French king Phillip II attacked Château Gaillard, the people inside felt pretty secure about being able to wait out the siege. But then came a soldier named Ralph the Snubnose who noticed a stain under a hole off to the side of one of the walls, and, using the nose for which he was named, figured out what the hole was used for.

That unlucky soldier had to climb his way up the toilet chute and through the hole to get into the castle (ew!). It worked — the guy surprised everyone inside and opened the gate to let his army in.

If that's what it took for Dak to find a way back to Sera and Riq, he was willing to try it — which is how he found himself staring up at the top of the tower when the men inside rolled a massive stone grinding wheel until it tottered just on the edge. One tiny tap and the thing would come crashing down.

Dak stood next to a group of Vikings wielding pickaxes against the base of the wall. They were so focused on their task that they had no idea of the danger looming above. Dak didn't even pause to think about the fact that some of these Vikings were with the SQ . . . which technically made them the bad guys.

“Move!” he shouted. He swung his pole around to shove two of the men back and then dove at a third, tackling him to the ground and rolling.

The stone wheel seemed to fall in slow motion, like a clip from an action movie. Dak could have sworn he felt the compression of air around him as a circular shadow grew larger until it seemed to swallow him.

He was pretty sure he was about to be squashed like a bug.

At the last minute he tucked his knees to his chin, just as the wheel slammed into the ground, barely missing his toes. The impact caused his teeth to jar and his whole body to lift into the air.

Men cried out in anguish. One of them had both of his legs pinned, and Dak thought he might have seen a hand sticking out from underneath — the hand of someone who'd been crushed and killed.

Around him Vikings leapt into action, striving to pull the injured men free as smaller stones and arrows fell around them. Dak tried to control his breathing, tried not to vomit all over himself as he dug into the mud to help. He felt his chin wobble and his throat burn with the promise of tears.

With great effort he swallowed them back. He glanced up at the tower, where Frankish soldiers leaned out over the edge, taunting the injured and dead below.

Suddenly, the lines that seemed so clear when they'd warped here became fuzzy. He knew that many of the Vikings must be SQ and therefore his enemy. At the same time, he'd spent the afternoon with these men, listening to their shouts as they worked together and fought together, sometimes even trading jokes. They had protected him with their shields and accepted him as their bannerman.

They couldn't all be evil, could they? And even if they were . . . did they deserve to die like this?

Dak was still trying to sort it all out when he saw what looked like a curl of smoke rising up from the top of the tower. Riq appeared then, leaning over and shouting something down at Dak, but there was too much noise for him to catch what the older boy was saying. What on earth was he doing up there to begin with?

Riq began to wave his arms frantically, but it wasn't until Dak saw the lip of a steaming cauldron that he understood what he was trying to say. Riq was warning Dak, telling him to get out of the way. Already drops of the burning viscous liquid were falling like rain, hitting the ground around him with popping and hissing sounds.

Dak looked at the Viking soldiers grouped around the injured men, their shields held over their heads to keep their fallen comrades safe. They had no idea what was coming. He wanted to save them — but it was already too late.



Riq's expression was bleak when he stumbled upon Sera and Bill. As soon as she laid eyes on him, Sera's stomach tightened into frightened knots.

“What’s wrong?”

Riq said only one word, his voice almost a whisper. “Dak.”

She leapt to her feet, ignoring the way her hands were beginning to tremble.

*He’s okay*, she thought. He just had to be. But the longer Riq avoided her eyes the more she began to fear the rest.

Bill stood and moved next to her, his arm just barely brushing her shoulder. His hand slipped into hers and she squeezed, not realizing until that moment what it meant to have someone by her side for whatever Riq was about to say next.

“What happened?” she whispered.

Riq shook his head. “It was chaos.” He drew in a deep breath as if to steel himself to say the words aloud. “Dak was with a band of Vikings trying to dig under the tower. They . . .” He swallowed a few times. “The Franks dropped cauldrons of hot pitch and wax down on top of them.”

Sera felt like the floor was dropping away from her. The sensation was similar to the aftereffect of a Remnant: nausea, dizziness, and a confusion about time and space.

Riq wiped a hand across his face. “I didn’t realize it was happening until it was too late, or I would have stopped it.”

“Did you see his . . .” No matter how hard Sera struggled, she couldn’t bring herself to say the word *body*.

But it was clear Riq knew what she was asking. “Some of them jumped into the river. . . .”

A ribbon of hope began to thread its way through Sera. “So he could have escaped? He could still be alive.”

Riq hesitated before answering, and the pause buoyed her sense of optimism for a moment before it all came crashing down.

“Sera, the ones who dove into the Seine were on fire — that’s why they were so desperate for water.” His voice broke as he added, “I saw Dak’s body floating down the river. He was facedown, and he wasn’t moving.”



## The Dead Man's Float

DAK FOUGHT his way to the surface of the river, his lungs burning. He'd only recently been tossed overboard from the *Santa María*, and he hadn't survived that to end up drowning now.

Finally, his head broke free and he felt fresh air on his cheeks. His first breath was a choking wheeze that sputtered into coughing. Around him the battle still raged, though the tenor of it had changed. Small flames peppered the ground at the base of the tower, but most of the Vikings who had just been fighting there were gone.

Dak couldn't bear looking at any of the nearby bodies. It was too much — too real that the men he'd been working alongside were now dead. His stomach twisted, and he gagged on a mouthful of vile river water.

It didn't take Dak long to realize he was a target while treading water in the middle of the river, but his options were severely limited. The wall prevented him from climbing to land on the island side. And men who staggered to shore on the mainland were quickly brought down by arrows and bolts. Those seemed to be the lucky ones — other Vikings fought to pull off their heavy armor even as it dragged them down into the depths of the water.

Throughout all of this the Franks taunted their enemy, shouting: "Right badly burned, aren't you! Go jump in the river to save your flowing manes!"



Dak was really beginning to hate those guys, and not just because they were trying to kill him. Which gave him an idea: If they wanted him dead, so be it.

He slumped in the water, letting his body go limp. His back bobbed along the surface as his legs dragged below. The current tugged at him, pulling him away from the tower and the bridge to safety.

Every now and again he lifted his head, just barely, to take in a lungful of air. When they'd taught him the dead man's float at the pool for PE, he'd thought it was useless (even though it was the only thing he was really good at in that class) and he hadn't resisted letting his teacher know how he felt.

As Dak floated to safety he made a mental note to find Mr. Foltz and thank him when he got back to his own time.



Something cold nudged Dak's hand. He'd been washed ashore ages ago and even though he was drenched with foul river water and freezing, he wasn't taking any chances. That's why he'd spent the last several hours playing dead and didn't plan on moving until dark. But curiosity got the best of him now. He cracked open an eye and came face-to-face with rows of sharp, gleaming teeth.

Dak had never been a really great actor, and he completely broke character now — no one was going to believe he was dead once he yelped and started to scrabble backward. He didn't get far before a very wet and very smelly tongue lapped his face from chin to hair.

He recognized the stench immediately. "Ew, Vígi," he grumbled as he wiped the drool from his cheeks. "We need to find you a toothbrush!"

In response the dog nudged him, her nose prodding at his hand until he relented and tangled his fingers in her ears. She sat with a thud and then slipped to the ground, rolling against him with her four paws in the air.

"I think she likes you," a voice barreled. "Though you'd be the first."

Dak raised his eyes to find Rollo towering above him. He carried a huge sword in his meaty fist, and Dak couldn't stop staring at it. The double-edged

blade was probably almost as long as he was tall.

It was just his luck that he'd avoided being crushed, pierced, burned, and drowned only to die under a giant's sword just when he thought things were beginning to look up.

At least the blade appeared sharp so his death would be quick.

Rollo must have sensed the direction of Dak's thoughts because he glanced at his sword and started to laugh, a sound like thunder. "Sorry," he said, slipping the weapon into a leather scabbard hanging on his left hip. "I didn't mean to let *Kettlingr* scare you."

Except that when the device in Dak's ear translated *Kettlingr*, Dak couldn't hold back the snort of laughter. "Wait, you named your sword *Kitten*? As in 'meow'?"

Rollo scowled, which was a pretty terrifying sight that caused Dak to choke on his giggles. "If you've ever been on the wrong end of a ticked-off kitten, you know how ferocious they can be."

Dak fell into a spasm of coughing to hide his amusement, which only caused Rollo to slam his palm against Dak's back as if to help, truly knocking the wind out of him. While Dak struggled for air, the Viking hauled him to his feet.

"Let's head back to camp," he said, gesturing down the river in the direction of light on the horizon. "Fighting's over for the day and it's time for dinner. I'd already be eating if it weren't for Vígi and her whining. She wouldn't shut up until I agreed to let her look for you."

The dog in question sat next to Dak, mouth open in a grin as she panted happily away. He tweaked her ears and she leaned against him, almost knocking him over.

"I really need to, er . . ." He glanced up at the side of a nearby ship, desperate for an excuse. He knew that so long as anyone was watching him, there was no way for him to recover the Square and sneak back into the fortified city. "I should really check to make sure none of the shields have splinters. You know how that can be out on the battlefield. Nothing worse, really."

This elicited a hearty laugh. “Nonsense,” Rollo boomed. “You’ve distinguished yourself today, held the standard high, and saved many lives. Men back at camp want to honor you and share food.” He then frowned. “Trust me when I say these are not men you want to keep waiting.”

Dak remembered how ferocious the soldiers had been on the battlefield, and imagining them turning their ire on him was enough to propel him along the riverbank with Rollo.

Besides, the thought of real, actual Viking warriors wanting to thank Dak for his bravery? That was an experience he didn’t want to miss!



## Learning a Secret

SERA TRIED to avoid looking at the faces of those she passed as she walked with Riq over the bridge and back to the fortified city. The night was dark, which helped, but she still couldn't help noticing the hollowness of everyone's eyes, the slump of their shoulders. Despite all the damage they had done, it was barely a dent in the Viking force. A batch of men was repairing the tower and trying to build onto it, but how long could the city really stand against such an onslaught?

As depressing as these thoughts were, it was better than thinking about Dak. Sera knew that Riq was convinced something terrible had happened to her best friend — that he might even be dead — but she refused to believe that. If something truly awful had happened to him, she'd have felt it.

It didn't make scientific sense and she knew it. Sera was usually the first one to dismiss what she called “mumbo jumbo psychic rubbish.” Once, in third grade, a girl in class had argued that certain lines on a person's palm revealed how long that person would live, how successful they would be, and even if they would get married. Sera had been the one to explain how such ideas had no scientific basis. Her entire life had been ruled by facts and data rather than emotion.

But now she was relying purely on emotion — on her belief that Dak was still alive somewhere out in the Viking camp — and it frightened her.

“Bill told me he suggested we leave Dak and warp away,” Riq said, interrupting her thoughts and breaking the silence. Bill had given them some sort of excuse about finding food and shelter, but really Sera knew he was leaving the two of them alone to figure out what to do next.

“Dak has the SQuare,” Sera reminded Riq. “Without that we have no idea what the next Break is.”

Riq stopped and put a hand on her arm. “But if we knew where to go next, would you warp away?”

She opened her mouth, but no answer came out.

“What if it were me out there instead?” he asked.

That answer came to her immediately: She’d probably leave him behind. Though she didn’t voice it out loud her cheeks colored with embarrassment, which gave Riq his answer.

He grunted and looked away. “I know what the right answer is,” he finally said. “Fixing the Breaks is more important than any one of us. And if I’m ever the one out there I hope you make the decision to leave me. It’s not like I have much of anything to go back to.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

This surprised Sera. “You have your parents. That’s more than I have.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Ever wonder how I can speak so many languages? Sure, I’m a prodigy.” He flashed the cocky smile she was used to, but it disappeared quickly. “But I also have a lot of time on my own. Both my parents are Hystorians . . . that kind of thing takes over your life if you haven’t noticed.”

She frowned. “It doesn’t have to.”

In response Riq laughed. “Says the girl more than a millennium away from home.”

Just when Sera thought she was getting to see a new side of Riq, one that wasn’t cocky and bristly, he had to go and mess it up. Sera was tired of it. “Why do you always have to be such a pill?” she asked.

Riq seemed genuinely surprised by the question, which spurred her on.

“You’re always arguing — bickering, more like it. Why can’t you just get along with people?”

He opened his mouth to answer and then closed it before turning away. Sera watched how his shoulders tensed. “You experience Remnants, right?” he asked.

Sera was caught off guard. He knew the answer already, but it still seemed so personal. She usually only talked about the subject with Dak, even though he didn’t really understand what it was like.

Sera nodded. The events of the past several days caught up to her all at once, and she allowed herself to slide down a wooden fence until she was sitting on hard-packed dirt. She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs.

“They used to be rare,” she explained. “Sometimes I’d go to this old barn that stood on the edge of my uncle’s property, and I’d just *know* that at any minute the door would be flung open and two people would come strolling out toward me. It felt like they —” She cut herself off, feeling embarrassed. She pressed her finger against the dirt, dragging it in the endless loops of the infinity sign.

Riq sat next to her, close enough that she could feel a bit of warmth from him. “They were what?” he prodded.

She shifted and shrugged, feeling uncomfortable sharing something so personal. “It just felt like I should know them,” she said softly. “That they loved me more than anything else in the world.”

There, she’d said it. The one secret that she’d never even shared with Dak. He had two parents who adored him and supported him, whereas she’d never known her parents. It was an absence her life always tilted around.

Riq didn’t tell her she was stupid; he simply accepted everything she said as if he understood. “Your Remnants . . . they’ve been getting worse, haven’t they?” he asked.

Sera sighed. “It started when we were on the *Santa María* and I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror. And now I get Remnants sometimes when I just say something. Usually when I’m bossing Dak around.” She tried to laugh a bit to ease the seriousness of their discussion.

Riq smiled, but it was halfhearted. He seemed distracted.

She decided to ask him the question that had been on her mind for days. “When we were on the *Santa María*, you mentioned that if we fixed the Breaks we wouldn’t have to deal with Remnants anymore. You said that we were saving the world, but we were also saving ourselves.” Sera took a deep breath. “So do you have them, too? Remnants?”

He nodded slowly, and she waited for him to say more. “Is it okay if . . .” He cleared his throat and shifted as if uncomfortable. “If I don’t talk about it?”

Sera tried not to feel hurt and disappointed but it must have showed in her expression, because he leaned toward her until his shoulder bumped hers and added, “Yet. I’m just not ready to talk about it yet.”

She bumped him back. If Riq wasn’t ready yet, then she’d wait.

“But here’s the thing that really scares me,” he said. “Mine have been getting worse. Much, much worse. I can’t go more than a few hours without experiencing one. I’m worried that something we’re doing here is causing it to happen. That we’ve made a huge mistake.” He turned, finally looking her in the eye. “What if we’ve made the effects of the Break worse rather than better?”



## A Sinking Feeling

DAK WASN'T sure how much more he could take. He'd planned to start the day extra early by slipping away from camp while it was still dark, grabbing the SQuare, and finding a way back to Sera and Riq.

Things hadn't worked out that way. Apparently what Dak considered "extra early," the Vikings considered past time to get the day started. He was roused by the clamber of chain mail and armor, and the general hustle and bustle of men preparing for battle.

He tried to sneak away but only succeeded in joining with a band of soldiers headed toward the Seine. At first he had his hopes up that they'd use the boats to attack the bridge and tower and it would be easy for him to recover the SQuare.

But of course Dak was never that lucky. Instead he found himself stuck nearly all day with the job of gathering debris from the battlefield: broken siege engines, trampled plants, even the bodies of executed prisoners — anything and everything he could carry. All because someone had come up with the brilliant idea of filling in the shallows of the river so that the Vikings' infantry could get around the tower.

It was the most horrific job Dak could ever imagine — much, much worse than scrubbing the deck of the *Santa María* or sneaking around in the Parisian sewers during the French Revolution — and he was miserable. Time and time



again, he looked for an opportunity to sneak away, but nothing ever presented itself.

Until he overheard a few men discussing their next brilliant plan: lighting a few ships on fire and guiding them down the river toward the bridge. And one of the ships they planned to use was the very one on which he'd hidden the SQuare.

Dak's heart sped up. The SQuare was their only lifeline to their own time period. If they lost the SQuare, they might as well give up on fixing any other Breaks.

They might as well give up on looking for his parents.

"I'll help," Dak volunteered, almost tripping over his own feet as he raced to catch up with the group of soldiers making their way to the ships. He waited for them to brush him off, but then he realized that two of them were men he'd saved the day before. They didn't turn him away but instead welcomed him with hearty slaps on his back.

Dak was surprised by how good it felt to be accepted into something so easily. He'd always been more of an outcast at school, made fun of for his habit of spouting random bits of history. That's one reason he and Sera were such good friends — being outcasts gave them something in common.

He'd have never guessed that he'd ever feel at home with a band of Viking warriors. As they made their way to the ships, gathering dried grasses and sticks, Dak watched his companions. Many of them weren't much older than Riq, but they had a look in their eyes that said they'd lived very different lives.

For them, there was no such thing as school or hanging out at museums or going to lectures given by world-renowned physicists. But the Vikings' lives also weren't only about war, as Dak had once thought. Most of these men were simply looking for a place to settle — land to work and women to marry. But because most of the Viking history was oral rather than written, so much information about them was lost over time. What written details did survive tended to be recorded by those who lost battles against the North Men, which made it easy to see why the portrayals were mostly negative.

Sure, some of the Vikings were bloodthirsty, only interested in pillaging and killing, but that wasn't the majority.

Dak marveled at how he'd almost describe some of these men as friends. Which was why it was that much more difficult to share their food and camp, and yet also try to figure out ways to thwart their efforts at getting into the city.

The longer the Vikings were kept at bay, the better chance the Hystorians had of keeping Siegfried from amassing power, and of fixing the Break. Which meant Dak had to sabotage the very people who'd accepted him as one of their own.

They split into several groups and spread out among the chosen ships to stuff them with the dried debris and prep them to be set on fire. Dak made sure he was assigned to the boat where he'd hidden the SQuare.

His heart pounded hard. What if someone else had found it first? What if it had somehow slipped free and was now on the bottom of the river, broken beyond repair? He climbed aboard and checked the shield he thought he'd hidden it behind.

It wasn't there.

Had it been moved? Did he just have the wrong spot? As Dak started to search the boat, someone tossed a flaming torch into the aft hull. The fire sparked instantly, eating along the deck and across benches. Overhead the sail roared, its fabric catching quickly.

Dak was running out of time fast. Heat buffeted him and sweat broke out across his forehead and neck. Twice he shied away from the crackle of the hungry fire, but he couldn't give up on finding the SQuare.

The boat started to make its way down the river away from the group of Vikings and toward the bridge. Dak was stuck on board, still frantically searching behind every shield. There were twenty-five along each side and so far he'd only checked out half of them.

From the shore, men shouted for him to jump, but he couldn't give up. If the SQuare was destroyed, it wouldn't matter that Dak survived the fire — they'd never be able to fix the Great Breaks and avoid the Cataclysm.

Wind whipped around him, feeding the flames and sending smoke spiraling into the sky. The flaming ships were drawing dangerously close to the bridge. If the Vikings succeeded in catching the bridge on fire, it would collapse and they'd have free reign up the Seine to the cities and villages beyond.

That bridge wasn't just protecting Paris, but also the rest of France — and the future of Europe. It was the only thing keeping Siegfried and the rest of the SQ from amassing even more power.

Suddenly, Dak's priorities were split. He had to find the SQuare, but he also had to make sure the flaming boat didn't make it to the bridge. Which was more important?

With a sinking stomach, he abandoned the search for the SQuare and pulled out an axe he'd found among the battlefield debris. He began swinging it at a seam between two boards of the hull, trying to make an opening. The wood was thick and solid, and Dak despaired of making any headway, but heat from the fire must have already weakened it because a crack began to form.

Billowing smoke choked the air around him, making his eyes water and lungs burn. The fire burned fiercely, consuming everything as it made its way toward the bow where Dak hacked furiously at the hull.

The wood groaned in protest and then a spurt of water sprayed up through a small hole in the bottom of the boat. It only took three more whacks with the axe for a healthy amount of water to begin filling the boat, slowing its progress toward the bridge.

Dak was almost out of time. The fire had already eaten its way past the mast, destroying more than half of the shields along the way. As fast as possible Dak checked the rest of the ship for the SQuare. Water dragged at his feet, climbing up his calves.

He found the SQuare in the very last place left to be checked. The bag holding it was already drenched, and he pulled the SQuare free and slipped it into the waistband of his pants under his tunic.

With a whoop of success he leapt from the ship, landing knee-deep in the shallows of the river. As he fought his way against the current toward shore he watched as the ship took on more water and began listing to its side before capsizing and sinking just as its bow struck a grouping of rocks used to support the bridge.

The other boats fared no better, crashing against the sunken boat just shy of the bridge. It was a beautiful sight to Dak, and he felt a surge of pride at having accomplished both tasks. He'd rescued the Square *and* kept the Vikings from scoring a hit against Paris. All in all, Dak was pretty much a hero as far as he was concerned.

Before he could gloat too much, Dak was forcibly spun around. Gorm, the scarred Viking, grabbed him by the tunic, almost lifting him from the ground. "You think you're clever, don't you?" His face was so close that spit flew from his mouth with every word, peppering Dak's cheeks.

"I . . ." He scrambled for some sort of excuse and came up empty. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The Viking wrenched the axe from Dak's grip and tossed it into the river. Dak started to protest but thought better of it.

Dak was caught. He struggled to get free of the man's grasp but it was useless. Without a weapon he had no hope against someone so much stronger and larger.

The Viking grinned in an unpleasant way, the scar across his face causing his features to twist. "I know someone who will be *very* interested in speaking with you."



## A Call from the Future

IT STARTED raining when the sun set, and Sera was drenched. Her teeth chattered as she huddled under the shelter of an old empty barn.

“At least the weather put an end to most of the fighting,” Bill suggested, trying to find something to be cheerful about. Sera only grunted in return. She couldn’t stop thinking of her warm bed in her warm house in a time when such a thing as gas heat existed.

“I’d kill for a hot shower right now,” she grumbled.

“A Jacuzzi would be even better,” Riq agreed.

Bill looked between them, confused. “What’s a shower?”

Sera glanced his way, her arms wrapped tightly around her chest to keep as much warmth pressed to her body as possible. It had hardly occurred to her before meeting the Hystorians that there would be a period in time when something as basic as a shower didn’t exist.

“It’s like a bath, but the hot water falls from a showerhead — from a contraption in the wall or ceiling, like a waterfall,” she explained.

Bill still looked confused. “That sounds like a lot of work for your servants to heat that much water. How many buckets does it take?”

Sera opened her mouth and then closed it, looking to Riq for help.

“The water’s already hot and you don’t need buckets,” Riq said. “Most houses in our time have a heater inside, so there’s always hot water when you

turn on the tap.”

“Oh.” It was clear Bill didn’t really follow. But he was trying. “What else is there in the future?”

Sera closed her eyes, not even knowing where to begin. Her world was just so different from Bill’s on every conceivable level. But there was one other thing she wished she had even more than a hot shower: a phone to call Dak on to see if he was okay.

She tried to explain that to Bill. “Well, for one thing we have these things called cell phones. It’s a way for you to talk to someone else who might be far away.”

Bill’s eyes grew wide. “How does that work?”

When she was six, Sera had built her own encrypted smartphone so that she and Dak could talk whenever they wanted. She started explaining the basics of the advanced mobile-phone system and digitized sampling, but Riq interrupted her.

“Ignore techno-geek over there. Basically everyone has a phone number — a series of numbers — that you plug into a keypad and, ta-da, you’re talking to that person. I’m more of a language guy than a numbers guy, though, and since the numbers have letters associated with them, that’s how I memorize them. My phone number, for example, just happens to spell out the first ten letters of *sesquipedalianist*.” He paused before adding, “It means I like big words.”

Bill’s brow was furrowed and he looked like he was just about to ask a question when Sera bolted to her feet.

“That’s it!” she said excitedly. She pressed her palms against her forehead and groaned. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. For the love of mincemeat! It was so simple!”

Riq and Bill exchanged glances. “Uh, Sera?” Riq asked. “What are you talking about?”

She knelt, using her finger to draw out a series of numbers in the dirt. It didn’t take long for Riq to figure out what she was doing. When she hesitated, trying to remember what came next, he helped to fill in the gaps.

“It’s the series of numbers from the SQuare,” she said. “We thought it was some sort of bifid cipher but we couldn’t figure out what the key was.” She began to draw vertical lines to separate the numbers into pairs.

Below that she sketched the face of a phone keypad, and that’s when Riq groaned, “*Ooh*, I get it now. The first number indicates which number on the keypad and the second is the letter’s position. So since *A*, *B*, and *C* are all on the number two button, twenty-one becomes the letter *A*. How did we miss that before?”

Sera was so elated that she couldn’t help laughing at the look of utter confusion on Bill’s face. “Brint and Mari wanted to ensure that no one from the past could figure out the key to the cipher. What better way to do that than to use a gadget only someone from our time period would know?”

Riq was already matching letters to each pair of numbers so that 32 became *E* and 62 became *N*.

As he worked Bill reached over and ran the knuckles of his hand along the edge of Sera’s jaw. Her breath caught and her cheeks blazed with heat.

“You’d smudged some dirt,” he said softly.

She didn’t know what to say and settled with, “Oh,” which elicited a smile from him. That only made her neck burn hot as well and she wondered if Bill could see how furiously she was blushing in the dim light. She hoped not.

For his part, Riq seemed oblivious, his forehead scrunched up in concentration as he unraveled the message.

326274827332 744332413373433231 8121523274  
7121734374 71322123323382535393  
Ensure Siegfried Takes Paris Peacefully

All the blood heating Sera’s cheeks drained as the message swirled through her mind. “If that’s true . . .” She couldn’t even finish the statement. She didn’t want to give it voice, as if that could somehow make it real.

Riq didn’t have such hesitation. He looked at her, his own face betraying fear. “Then we’ve definitely made things worse.”



Dak was beginning to realize just how much trouble he'd gotten himself into. His arms were pinned behind him by the scarred Viking named Gorm, who looked a little too pleased to finally have Dak in his clutches.

Even though he had a good idea where he was being taken, his stomach twisted into knots as they approached the large structure dominating the far end of the camp. While most other Vikings slept out in the open or under simple A-frame tents, apparently Siegfried would do with nothing less than a wooden-framed hut.

Gorm thumped Dak forcefully on the back, shoving him so hard that he stumbled into the hovel. All conversation inside halted, though a few men snickered when Dak tripped and fell to his hands and knees.

Dak grimaced as the dirt floor scraped his palms. He felt the SQuare shift where it was jammed against his back and he froze, hoping it wouldn't slide free.

If Siegfried or any of the other men saw the SQuare, that would be the end of Dak and maybe even Sera and Riq as well. He couldn't risk it.

Slowly and carefully he lifted his head and looked around, using the movement to mask how he twisted his body to try and keep the SQuare in place. The structure had been built rapidly, and it showed in the crooked windows and uneven slant of the doorframe.

In the center blazed a fire, its smoke creating a thick layer of sludge along the ceiling as it struggled to find a way free through a hole in the roof. Carved earthen platforms topped with wooden boards and dingy rugs were built against the walls.

But what really drew Dak's attention were the men crouched around the fire, the flickering light casting shadows under their eyes. In the center of them sat Siegfried on the only stool in the room. Behind his shoulder a massive wooden shield hung from the wall, the SQ symbol emblazoned on it.

He looked over Dak's head to where Gorm the Time Warden stood in the door. "This doesn't look like dinner," he said, raising one eyebrow.



It didn't escape Dak's notice that this was the second time in two days someone had discussed eating him. He was really beginning to hate the ninth century.



## The Blood Eagle

DAK TRIED to call as little attention to himself as possible, which wasn't very easy when every eye in the room was focused on him.

"I found him sabotaging one of the ships." Gorm walked farther into the room until he was towering over Dak. "If it weren't for this boy, our plan to burn the bridge would have worked and we'd be in the city already."

This seemed to pique Siegfried's interest. He leaned forward, causing his stool to groan and crack in protest. For several moments, the Viking chieftain examined Dak until Dak couldn't take it anymore, and he started to squirm.

"I just tripped." Dak was dismayed at how scared and high-pitched his voice sounded. He scowled, trying to regain a little control of the situation. "If this guy" — he jerked a finger over his shoulder in the general direction of the Time Warden — "had better control of his boat, everything would have worked out fine."

Siegfried frowned and sent a questioning glance at Gorm, who quickly responded, "He may have tripped, but he also cut a hole in the hull with an axe."

Dak let out a long exhale. There really was no explanation he could give for that, but he still tried. "I thought the fire needed ventilation?"

One of the other men around the fire chuckled and quickly covered it by launching into a bout of coughing.

“You look familiar,” Siegfried prodded.

Dak swallowed, the sound so loud he was pretty sure the entire room heard. “I was your standard-bearer yesterday at the wall,” he offered.

Siegfried shook his head. “From somewhere else.” He squinted at Dak, trying to place him.

“He was with the translator in the cathedral,” Gorm offered. “The boy who spoke the Danish tongue as well as Latin and French.”

The grin that spread across Siegfried’s face did nothing to calm Dak’s fears. In fact, it made his blood run icy cold. There was nothing pleasant in the man’s expression, just pure malice.

What Gorm said next only made things worse. “He’s been working to sabotage your efforts. Who knows how many of our men have fallen because of him.”

That was going too far. Dak leapt to his feet. “It’s not true,” he shouted. “If it weren’t for me, more men would have been crushed or burned. I saved them!”

There were a few murmurs around the fire, but no one came to Dak’s defense — even though he recognized some of the men as ones who only the night before had been clapping him on the back in thanks.

Siegfried stood as well and came around the fire until he was towering over Dak. He smelled like old clotted cheese and his hands bunched into meaty fists. “Where are you from, boy?”

Dak opened his mouth to answer, but then realized that he couldn’t — Pennsylvania didn’t even exist yet. It was that slight hesitation that caused Siegfried’s eyes to gleam.

“How old are you?” Siegfried pressed.

Dak answered easily: “Eleven.”

“When were you born?”

The room was silent as Dak ran the calculation through his head in a panic. He’d never been one for numbers, and in the time it took for him to subtract eleven from 885, he’d confirmed Siegfried’s and the Time Warden’s suspicions.

“I-I’m not good with math,” he offered, but even he heard how lame the excuse was.

Siegfried leaned in so close that Dak could smell the sourness of his breath. It was even worse than Vígi’s, if that was possible.

“You and I both know who you really are,” Siegfried growled. The other Vikings in the room strained to listen in but Siegfried kept his voice low enough that only Dak could hear over the popping of the fire.

Panic flared in Dak’s stomach and the adrenaline pumping through his veins screamed at him to run. He was in way over his head. The Viking laid a heavy hand on Dak’s shoulder as if sensing the direction of his thoughts.

“You Hystorians have tried to stop us before but you underestimate our might and dedication to the cause.”

Dak tried to protest and feign ignorance; it was his only option. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Siegfried’s fingers tightened on Dak’s shoulder until he felt as though the Viking might rip his arm from his body. Sweat trailed down Dak’s back and he felt it pooling against the SQuare, causing it to shift.

*Not now*, he thought fiercely. Of course, that just caused him to sweat even more, which wasn’t helping matters.

“You Hystorians are so easy to outsmart.” Siegfried’s eyes gleamed. “You’re always so obsessed with playing by the rules. That will always be your downfall.”

Dak tried to look brave. “At least we have honor,” he retorted.

This only caused the Viking to tilt his head back with bone-shaking laughter that he cut off abruptly. He grabbed Dak’s chin between his finger and thumb so tightly that Dak’s eyes watered.

“I want you to hand over whatever it is that’s letting you sail through time,” he growled. “Nothing will get in the way of my power.” As if to emphasize his point he shook Dak roughly.

The SQuare slipped a little more so that it was now slowly sliding down his leg in his pants. Dak flexed his leg and squeezed, desperately trying to keep the device from dropping to the ground.

“I don’t know —” Dak started, but he was interrupted when Siegfried began shaking him even more. The SQuare caught behind his knee and he was certain that if anyone looked they’d see the shape of the device outlined against his pant leg.

Dak quickly shifted tactics. “I don’t have it,” he blurted out.

This stopped the shaking. “Get it,” Siegfried barked.

“I can’t,” Dak explained. “It’s inside the city walls.”

Siegfried pushed Dak with a roar. Dak crumpled to the floor, using the motion to yank the SQuare from his pants and shove it back under his waistband. When he looked up all eyes were still on Siegfried except for one pair on the far side of the room. It was Rollo, his expression trained on Dak with interest.

Dak knew right away the Viking had seen the SQuare. He waited for the large man to sound some sort of alarm or bring it to Siegfried’s attention but instead he remained silent, his focus glued on Dak’s every move.

Siegfried crouched, drawing Dak forward by his tunic. “You’ll get me that device and I’ll make yours a quick death. Defy me, and you, as well as your friends, will have the blood eagle just like Ivar the Boneless gave to Ælla of Northumbria.”

Dak frowned, his confusion evident. “Blood eagle?”

Gorm grinned, his teeth gleaming in anticipation. “We’ll slice open your back. Cut your ribs, one by one, and break them open to look like the bloody wings of an eagle. Then we pull out your lungs and watch them flutter. When we get bored with that, we’ll rip out your lungs and pour salt on all the wounds. Don’t worry about missing out — you’ll be alive and screaming through most of it.”



## Connections from Long Ago

DAK TUGGED again on the bars to his tiny cage, hoping that perhaps in the last five minutes they'd grown loose, but nothing budged. It was like being in the brig of the *Santa María* all over again except this time he was freezing and alone.

Dak was beginning to accept that history could kind of stink.

He'd been so sure that his knowledge would keep them all safe. And now look at him: waiting in a cage for a Viking chieftain to grow tired of him and toss him to the wolves.

As if just thinking the word *wolf* was enough to cause one to materialize, Dak heard a soft whining and then the brush of a cold nose against his knuckles. He squinted his eyes in the darkness to find Vígi standing by his cage, her ears pinned back in worry.

She paced around the cage restlessly, stopping every now and again to nudge his hand. He tried to pet her but could only manage to draw two fingers along the ridge of her snout.

"It's okay, girl," he whispered. He was surprised to hear his voice quaver a bit. He was glad that at least some living being cared about what happened to him.

A large form lumbered out of the darkness, rain dripping from his metal helmet and causing his thick cloak to hang limp and heavy from his

shoulders. Dak squinted, trying to make out who it was.

“Well,” the Viking said, striding toward the cage. Vígi’s tail thumped the ground as he neared. “You do keep surprising me.”

Dak recognized the voice before he saw the face: It was Rollo. The giant tugged on the bars of the cage, bending them open as though they were strings of cheese, and leaned his head in. “Now, you want to tell me what that contraption jammed down your pants is?”

Dak was totally busted. He squirmed in his cage, but that didn’t deter Rollo, who merely reached in and plucked the SQuare from behind Dak’s back. His finger must have brushed the ON switch, because it chirped to life with a bright light.

Rollo squealed in surprise, holding the SQuare away from his body as though it were some sort of poisonous bug that was crawling up his arm.

“Careful!” Dak cried. “Uh, please.”

“What is this thing?” Rollo asked, his eyes illuminated with wonder and by the light of the screen. Vígi bared her teeth in a growl, the hair between her shoulder blades standing on end so that she looked like a buffalo calf.

It was time for Dak to admit that he’d royally messed up. His cover was blown; no lie could dig him out of this hole. And he couldn’t fight the man either. Rollo could fell Dak with the flick of a finger. Plus, he was pretty sure that even though Vígi seemed to like him, the moment Dak threatened her master it would be all over for him.

“Back by the fire,” Rollo said, his gaze still riveted by the glowing screen, “you couldn’t say what year you were born.”

Dak felt his cheeks warm. He was a genius with history and dates; that he couldn’t answer that one simple question was a massive source of embarrassment.

He fumbled for an excuse. “I get nervous in front of, uh, chieftains.”

Rollo waved his words from the air. “It’s not me you have to worry about with this lot,” he said. “I’ll follow Siegfried when it’s in my best interest, but that doesn’t mean I support him in all endeavors, if you know what I mean.”

Dak wasn’t sure that he did and so he stayed silent.

The Square's screen went dark and Rollo sighed with dismay. Vígi relaxed, leaning all her weight against Dak's cage. Dak absently scratched at her ears and she grunted contentedly.

“My great-grandfather was one of the men to sack Lindisfarne Priory almost a century ago. It's true that Norsemen can be a dangerous lot who go off on voyages simply for the fighting and pillaging, but my great-grandfather was not a violent man. He was simply looking for someplace to settle down and start a farm with his wife.”

He smoothed his palm across the screen of the Square over and over again but he seemed lost in thought. “He told my father that he was surprised at how bloodthirsty the men were that day — more so than he'd ever seen before. He'd been hearing rumors about a new allegiance among several of them, some sort of quest for power that caused them to burn the Priory and kill everyone on the island.”

Dak thought of Siegfried and Gorm, and the calculated coldness of their eyes. He had no doubt that they and their ancestors could be a ruthless lot.

“My great-grandfather tried to avoid most of the pillaging, but as he was exploring the lower passages of the Priory he came upon a young monk who was trying to hide a few books. As soon as he saw my great-grandfather, the monk threw himself on his knees and begged for mercy.”

Vígi shifted, shoving her head farther into the cage, and Dak realized he'd stopped petting her. He was holding his breath, afraid of what Rollo might say next.

It occurred to Dak that he liked the giant and didn't want anything to ruin that feeling.

Rollo continued with his story. “The chieftains leading the raid had made it clear that everyone on the island must die. But when my great-grandfather drew his sword, he hesitated. The monk began to tell him about a group of scholars called the Hystorians whose job was to protect the past, present, and future. He said that if he died, a group of wicked men would gain boundless power that would eventually destroy the world.”

Dak swallowed when Rollo hesitated. “What did he do?”



Rollo handed Dak the Square. “He let the monk go free. And he told my grandfather, who told my father, who told me what he learned in the Priory that day: that there are forces in the world greater than we can understand, and if we ever had the opportunity to grant mercy where it felt warranted we should do so without hesitation.”

With a grunt, Rollo rose to his towering height and extended a hand toward Dak. “He taught me to be on the lookout for the extraordinary and to protect it. I’m pretty sure he was talking about you.”



It had rained throughout the night, and Sera had watched it for hours. She’d lost track of Bill, and now she had an unfounded fear that if she were to doze off, Riq would disappear, too.

A faint light began to seep along the horizon, struggling through the clouds, and church bells rang from not far away. She’d stayed up all night. And now it wouldn’t be long before the fighting commenced once again.

Riq peered out the window, his face twisting into resignation at the dreariness of the morning. He turned to her, leaning back against the rough stone wall and crossing one foot over the other. “What’s the plan, then?”

Sera had never considered herself any kind of leader before. But now it seemed Riq was looking to her for guidance. And why not? This entire mission had gone off the rails, with every move they made only causing things to get worse. She dreaded imagining about how their actions had already impacted the future.

“Well, we botched the negotiation. If we could have made the Parisians and Vikings see eye-to-eye, maybe convinced Siegfried not to sack the city at all, then maybe he would have settled here and never gone on to Normandy, and his great-great-great-grandson Bill Helm might have been a farmer instead of a vanquisher.”

“Sorry.” Riq grimaced, as he’d been the one who’d mistranslated the discussion between the Vikings and Bishop Gauzelin the first morning the Vikings came into Paris. If they’d been able to decipher the code on the

Square before leaping into action, they might have already fixed the Break and warped on to the next. And Dak might still be —

Sera waved a hand in the air. “What’s done is done and can’t be undone.” She paused. “Well, I mean *technically* it could be undone as we could go back through time, but it can’t be undone without causing more problems. The Wellsian radiation alone would —”

Riq was giving her that look that meant what she was saying was over his head. She cleared her throat. “Anyway, so, we’ve already mucked things up, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make it right. I still think our plan of keeping the Vikings at bay for as long as possible is a good one. At the end of the day we need to limit Siegfried’s power one way or another. And if the Franks win, we’ve done that. According to Bill, Bishop Gauzelin and Count Odo have sent for reinforcements from the king, Charles the Fat. Now it’s just a matter of holding out and waiting for help.”

“So what do we do in the meantime?” Riq asked.

Sera tried to grin but she was pretty sure it looked more like a grimace. “We help. We keep Paris from falling to the Vikings. And if Dak doesn’t make it back to us” — she took a deep breath — “then we go after him ourselves.”



## ***Berserkergang***

OF ALL the experiences Dak had imagined having on his travels, this wasn't one of them. Under Rollo's supervision, he'd stripped off his shirt and was only allowed to keep his pants on so that he could hide the SQuare.

Most of the men surrounding them, preparing for the first of the morning battles, were completely naked with mud smeared across their bodies. If there was anything they all had in common it was that they were horrifically ugly with noses that had been broken too many times to have any cartilage or bone left, and thick eyebrows that connected across their foreheads.

A bit of panic churned in Dak's stomach. No matter what Rollo insisted, there was no way Dak was going to pass as one of these men. His entire body was the size of one of their legs!

"This isn't going to work," he whispered to Rollo. The giant merely grunted in reply, motioning for Dak to smear more mud across his bare chest. Dak continued to sneak glances at those around him.

"So, you're saying I don't get any kind of armor?" Dak asked as Rollo pulled a wolf skin around his shoulders so that the head of the wolf rested on top of Dak's own.

"The spirit of this animal will protect you," Rollo answered, completely serious.

Dak wanted to say, “Yeah, because it worked so well for the animal,” but he kept that thought to himself.

“You know you’re insane, right?” Dak asked instead.

Rollo heaved a sigh. “I told you, Siegfried’s men are already searching the camp for you. If you have any chance of getting back inside the city to your friends, it’s in going with the first wave of battle. And that means becoming *berserkr*.”

A hulk of a man, completely naked except for a bear skin draped over his shoulders, walked through the group, offering each a flagon of what smelled like wine or some other kind of fermented fruit.

Dak braced himself when it came to be his turn, expecting the man to either burst out laughing or become enraged and pull his limbs apart with his bare hands. But the brute hardly seemed to notice Dak, just handed him a flagon and continued on.

Curious, Dak raised it to his lips only to find his hands empty. Rollo scowled at him as he poured the contents of the flagon onto the ground. “This isn’t for boys,” he said, which made Dak all bristly . . . until he realized what the drink was doing to the men around him.

One by one they began to shiver, their teeth (those who still had them) clacking together noisily. Sure it was cold outside and most of the men were naked and wet from the rain, but they were such brutes of men that Dak assumed they’d be immune to chilly weather.

Rollo leaned over and whispered into Dak’s ear. “Once the *berserker* gang begins, stay to the left and toward the back. Whatever you do, don’t get between a *berserkr* and the enemy.”

Dak nodded, his stomach sour with anticipation and worry. The more he thought about Rollo’s plan, the less confident he felt. There was no way this was going to work. “Maybe we should just take our chances with —”

Rollo ignored him and instead handed Dak an axe like the one he’d had before. “Let them do the fighting. When they punch through the wall of the fortification, that’s when you make your move.”

“How do you know they’ll breach the city?” Dak asked, his panic increasing exponentially as he thought about Sera and Riq, not to mention their mission of keeping Siegfried out of Paris.

Rollo smiled and for a brief moment Dak saw the Viking in him — that part that drove him from home toward battle after battle. It caused the hair to raise along his arms. “No one can stand against the *berserkergang*,” he said.

Church bells rang in the distance, waking the fortified city for another day of battle. Dak stared across the expanse toward the river. Already he could see men patrolling the ramparts. Between here and there Vikings were attempting to roll siege engines across the bumpy ground closer to the tower.

“That’s the problem,” he murmured. The only way for him to get back to Sera and Riq was for Paris to fall. But if Paris fell, they’d fail at fixing the Break.

He didn’t know what to do. Everything he knew about history had already changed. There was no mental guidebook he could consult, no set of facts he could rely on to figure out what the best move would be.

“Maybe —” he started, but his voice was swallowed by the horns from the Viking camp. He was running out of time. His mind raced. There had to be a way to fix this Break, some detail he was missing. He scoured through various historical events in his head, tilting and turning them for any weakness.

A thought came to him. As more and more horns began to blast he clutched Rollo’s arm. “There’s one other thing you can do to help,” he shouted. Rollo frowned; it was clear he couldn’t hear him.

As if the horns had triggered it, the *berserkrs* around him stopped chattering as their faces turned a dark purple, their cheeks swelling as though they’d swallowed some sort of poison. Their already hideous faces became the masks of monsters.

Dak motioned furiously for Rollo to lean closer and then he shouted instructions into his ear. When he was done, Rollo straightened and gave a nod.

And then, with a massive roar of rage, the *berserker*gang began. Rollo slapped Dak on the back, shoving him toward the group. “Good-bye, friend,” he said. Vígi whined, straining at the frayed leash holding her by Rollo’s side. Dak nodded his thanks and began to run.



Their situation was so much worse than Sera had thought, she realized as she stood with Riq on the ramparts of the wall ringing the Île de la Cité. The rains during the night had led to flooding, which wasn’t helped by all the debris the Vikings had spent the day before throwing into the river. That, coupled with the half-sunk/half-burned Viking ships, meant that an enormous amount of strain was being put on the already damaged bridge. And if the bridge fell, the Vikings would finally be able to surround Paris.

Already she could hear the supports of the bridge groaning. Parisians were trying to relieve the pressure by prying loose some of the larger obstacles but the bridge was built so low to the water that nothing was working.

It didn’t help matters that it was still pouring, rain turning everything into a sodden mess. She could see on the faces around her that the Franks were ready to give up.

They couldn’t allow that to happen.

From across the river she heard horns wail and men scream with rage. It reminded her of their first day, the moment just after they’d warped when the ground shook with the stampede of the massive Viking army.

That morning Siegfried had pulled most of his men back at the last minute, only wanting to show the Franks the force of his might.

Today the Parisians wouldn’t be so lucky.

“Maybe you should take the Ring and get someplace safer,” Riq suggested.

Sera shook her head. “We’re in this together,” she told him but as soon as the words left her mouth she was hit with a bout of dizziness. Her stomach lurched and she stumbled. If it weren’t for Riq grabbing hold of her, she would have fallen.

She squeezed her eyes shut but that didn't stop the feeling that something was horribly off about the world. The words she'd just uttered, "We're in this together," echoed through her head again and again, and her heart ached with each incantation.

Phantom hands cupped her cheeks; a face like her own peered down at her with eyes brimming with love. She was warm and safe and loved and cherished.

And then it was gone, but Sera couldn't bear to open her eyes and return to the harshness of their reality. She wanted to live inside the Remnant.

"It's okay," Riq was murmuring, but she didn't believe him. It had never been okay.

Riq maneuvered her until she was sitting with her back against one of the crenellations and he pushed her head between her knees so that she could catch her breath and keep the world from spinning.

He didn't have to ask her what had happened. It was clear from his expression that he understood. "We have to fix this Break," she finally said when she'd caught her breath. "It's the only way to stop the Remnants. I don't know if I can take them any longer."

"We will," Riq promised, his hand warm against her back. Sera marveled at how not too long ago she'd viewed Riq as an annoying third wheel who did nothing but cause trouble. Now she realized she'd almost call him a friend.

"Thanks," she murmured.

He nodded, the gesture growing still as he looked over her shoulder out toward the river and the fields beyond. His eyes widened as an expression of horror crossed his face.

"What?" Sera demanded. She shifted to her knees. Riq tried to keep her from looking, but she finally dodged around him until she could see what had caused him such fear.

A band of naked men was sprinting across the field, furs of various animals trailing from their shoulders and gleaming weapons waving over their heads. They screamed and roared, their faces purple. Aghast, she averted her

eyes . . . and that's when she saw Dak at the edge of the pack, axe raised in the air as he ran at full speed toward the fortified walls.





## Rallying the Troops

SERA RACED down the ladders and to the bridge. Waves crashed over the sides, making the stone surface dangerously slick. The north tower on the mainland looked very far away, but that didn't stop her. Riq called after her, but she didn't wait for him to catch up. More than once she slipped and fell, wincing as she scraped her palms and skinned her knees.

Over the roar of the rising river she heard the sound of battle just beginning. Through the gaps in the north tower's metal gate she caught glimpses of men fighting. She clenched her hands into fists, refusing to even consider that she might be too late.

She had to make it to the tower. She had to keep the archers from taking aim at her best friend. She had to find a way to get Dak back safely.

She didn't want to think about the consequences if she failed.

Stones fell from the sky, clattering around her: the first wave of assaults from the Viking siege engines. A few pebbles struck her shoulder and a massive boulder landed two inches to her left, almost crushing her toes.

She was just approaching the entrance to the tower when Riq barreled into her, shoving her to safety. Behind them arrows whizzed and pots of flaming oil exploded. A few flames sputtered around their feet and Riq leapt to stomp them out.

They stared at each other for a second, trying to catch their breath, both aware that if they'd been any slower they probably wouldn't have made it without catching fire or getting impaled. As it was, the bridge was already beginning to crumble under the force of the swollen river and the crash of falling debris.

"If the bridge goes, we'll be stuck on the wrong side of the river!" Riq shouted.

"We have to," Sera responded. "For Dak."

Riq nodded and pulled Sera to her feet. Together they raced through the tower. From above they heard the shouts of soldiers trying to fight through bouts of punishing rain.

They'd just started up a set of stone stairs when the wall to their right began to tremble. At first Sera only felt a series of vibrations but soon enough they were strong enough to jolt her off balance. Stones shook loose, pebbles falling from the ceiling.

Men began to stream down from above, their swords drawn and their faces vivid with panic. "Run!" the soldier in the lead shouted. "They're about to breach!" They raced back toward the fortified island.

Riq grabbed Sera by the wrist and began to drag her across the bridge. She dug in her heels.

"What are you doing?" Riq asked, aghast.

"If they breach, we fail," she said softly.

"If we die, any hope of avoiding the Cataclysm dissolves."

They looked at each other as soldiers streamed past them. One man made it only three steps along the bridge before being struck by an arrow. He fell to his knees and collapsed, his sword clattering from his grasp.

There was another loud thud and the ground jolted under their feet, causing Sera to stumble. A tremendous cracking sound boomed as fissures raced through the outer wall of the tower. Streaks of watery morning light began to filter through, accompanied by the sound of Vikings raging.

The tower wall was crumbling.

Sera looked back at the fortified island through the rain. Soldiers ringed the ramparts, their bows raised as they let loose arrow after arrow, so fast their movements were a blur.

She slipped her hand into the sack on her belt. Her fingers tightened around the Infinity Ring, hidden inside. She knew Riq was right; it was smarter for them to retreat.

But Sera was tired of always having to make the smart choices. Just this once, she wanted to make the bold one and follow her gut.

Everything around her trembled and strained, the tower groaning under the onslaught of siege engines. As the first chunk fell free Sera dashed toward the fallen soldier on the bridge and snatched up his sword.

Riq was so stunned he didn't move to stop her. With a crashing boom, a break opened in the wall, the last bit of defense between the Vikings and the Franks crumbling. Even though her heart pounded ferociously and her hands trembled, she refused to let fear make her hesitate.

As soon as the dust cleared from the collapsed wall, Sera leapt into the breach with the sword held high. Her gaze skimmed over the mass of Viking warriors racing toward her clad only in the skins of animals until she spotted Dak.

“Go!” she screamed at him. “Go!”



The moment Dak saw Sera step from the rubble of the broken wall waving a massive sword over her head Dak thought, *She's gone completely insane*. Then he started running faster.

All around him *berserks* screamed and bellowed, their faces monstrous masks of rage. Some were clearly injured, arrows piercing arms or chests, but they seemed not to notice or slow. There would be no reasoning, no calling them back. And they were all running straight for Sera and the gap in the tower.

She stood on the pile of rubble, her sword held high in such a way that it gleamed in the damp morning. She looked bold and fierce — unlike the

science geek who'd been his best friend for years.

*She looks like she's about to get herself killed.* Blood roared in Dak's ears at the thought, making his feet pound faster than he thought was possible.

He tried waving his arms, calling for her to fall back, but his voice was lost in the din of the battlefield.

And then a curious thing happened. Soldiers began to pour from the breach behind Sera, men in armor with swords and axes and spears and arrows. They streamed around Sera as though she were rallying them with a battle cry.

"For Lutetia!" they shouted, paying homage to the old Roman name for Paris as they raced into the fray.

For an instant the *berserkr*s hesitated, faced with this new approaching army. Dak himself was so distracted by the sight of Sera that he didn't notice the boy racing at him until it was too late. He tackled Dak, slamming him to the ground. Dak rolled, struggling to get a better grip on his axe as the two of them tussled for control of the weapon.

Dak was not exactly a seasoned warrior, but he still managed to gain the advantage on his opponent, twisting until he was kneeling on his chest. Dak was just about to clobber the boy over his head with the axe handle when he held up his empty hands and gasped: "Wait! I'm with Sera!"

The axe hovered inches from the boy's head. The adrenaline coursing through Dak's body urged him to strike fast and hard, but his brain was screaming at him to stop and listen.

With a great deal of effort, he held still, hands trembling from the rush of battle. "Prove it," he growled, surprised at how raw and angry his voice sounded.

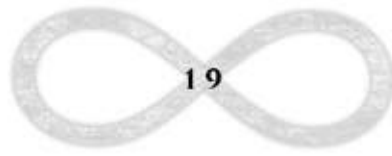
"My name is Billfrith," he said. "I'm a . . . a . . ." He seemed to hesitate over the word and then leaned forward and whispered, "Hystorian."

Dak blinked back his surprise and then rolled from the boy, giving him a chance to breathe. "I thought you'd be older."

Billfrith twisted his lips. "Well, imagine my surprise when I realized the fate of the world rested in the hands of kids."

“Hey,” Dak countered. “We haven’t screwed it up yet, have we?”

The other boy declined to respond to that and instead rose to his feet, tugging Dak up after him. “I’d love to sit and chat about the effectiveness of your efforts, but if you haven’t noticed we’re sitting in the middle of a battlefield. Perhaps we could find someplace less deadly to catch up.” An arrow pierced the ground between them. “Now would be a good time to start running.”



## The Reunion

SERA STOOD stunned as Frankish troops streamed around her, racing out toward the battlefield with weapons drawn and cries of victory on their lips. Several of them nodded to her as they ran past, as though she were somehow responsible for this turn of events.

Surrounded by the crowd of soldiers, she lost track of Dak. The adrenaline rush of the last several moments began to dim, quickly replaced with a rising tide of panic.

Riq appeared by her side and she clutched his arm. “Where’s Dak?!” she asked.

“This way,” he answered, and he took off running across the battlefield. Sera followed. For the time being, both sides had halted the flow of arrows, the armies so jumbled it was impossible to let loose anything and not endanger their own men.

Sera and Riq took advantage of this lull, dodging past groups of sparring warriors. She cringed as blade met blade and metal sliced through leather. The Viking *berserkrs* lived up to their name, a sheen of madness glazing over their eyes as they fought with a rage that seemed incomprehensible.

Riq led her toward a large stone church on the edge of the battlefield, just out of range of the fighting. Sera caught a glimpse of two tall towers bookending a wall set with arched windows before they hurried inside.

It was the smell that did it to her. She'd been expecting a normal church, the dusty scent of stones mixed with the lingering hint of incense. What greeted her was the stench of a barnyard: wet wool, damp hay, and the close quarters of too many animals.

The Remnant slammed into her, causing her to stumble. She was reminded of the abandoned barn on the edge of her uncle's property and hit with the sense that this is what it should smell like.

She swore she could feel someone taking her hand and gliding it along the flank of a horse, patiently teaching her how to care for the animal after a wild ride through the fresh grass.

She sucked in a gasp, dizziness spiraling through her. Strong hands gripped her shoulders, easing her to the ground.

When she was able to open her eyes she found Riq kneeling in front of her. "Sera?" he whispered.

She blinked, trying to gather her thoughts and stop the churning in her stomach. "I . . . I'm okay."

It was clear from Riq's face that he knew she was lying. Even so, he didn't press her on it. Instead he helped her to her feet and ushered her from the vestibule into the church proper.

Any pews that once existed had been stripped out or arranged to make crude pens for the slew of animals housed inside. But that's not what drew Sera's attention.

"Dak!" she cried out, and then she was running toward her best friend.



Dak didn't admit it out loud, but he couldn't have been happier to see Sera, and even Riq, running into the church. He allowed Sera to hug him, relieved to see his best friend again.

They all started talking at once, swapping stories about what they'd been through over the past few days, but their reunion was cut short by Billfrith. He dashed in from where he'd been keeping watch in the bell tower. "Sorry,

but we don't have time for a happy reunion," he said, out of breath. "A band of Vikings is headed this way, and they don't look too pleased."

"Bill!" Sera said in surprise. Dak watched with interest as her cheeks colored. "You're safe."

The Hystorian smiled shyly back at her and Dak snickered, a sound he cut off instantly when faced with a glare from Sera. He cleared his throat, but his shoulders still lurched a bit with unspent laughter.

"I wouldn't be the one laughing, wolf boy," Riq muttered under his breath and now it was Dak's turn to blush, remembering that he was basically half-naked with a wolf pelt slung from his shoulders.

"There's no time," Bill insisted. Even as he said the words, a loud crash rang out from the front of the church. "I've barred the door, but it won't hold for long."

He turned to Dak. "Do you have the Square?" Dak nodded, pulling it free. "And you have the Ring?" Bill asked Sera. She pulled it out but didn't make any moves to start programming it.

"We haven't fixed the Break yet," she protested.

Bill stepped toward her and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Your safety is more important," he said softly.

Sera shook her head and turned to Dak. "We unraveled the code after you left. It said that we were supposed to let Siegfried take the city peacefully. Riq and I figure that the Hystorians speculated that Siegfried would settle here, never extending his power, never heading to Normandy at all."

Riq supplied the conclusion Sera hadn't. "It means we messed up by prodding the Franks to fight."

Dak thought through the implications of that. He ran through various scenarios, playing out the effects of their actions through history like an intricate chess game. "But as long as we keep the Vikings from Normandy, we should be cool, right?" he concluded.

Riq and Sera exchanged a glance and a shrug.

"I mean, really all we're doing is preventing the SQ from establishing themselves in Normandy. And if the Vikings never settle there, we'll have



done that.”

“I guess,” Sera agreed. “But how can we do that?”

Dak grinned. “I’ve taken care of everything.”

They heard another boom and the cracking of wood against stone. A familiar dog came loping into view from the back of the church. When she reached Dak she reared on her hind legs to place her front paws on his shoulders. Vígi gave his face a very wet lick and Dak gagged at the smell.

Behind her ambled Rollo, each footfall the sound of thunder. Sera, Riq, and Bill all drew weapons although their faces paled.

“Your friend is right,” Rollo boomed. “I’ll keep Siegfried and the others from Normandy if that’s what needs to happen. I hear Burgundy is nice this time of year and that King Charles the Fat has a fondness for paying large fees to those who help him quell uprisings. Nothing a man like Siegfried likes better than a hefty purse of silver!”

Sera glanced at Dak, her eyes huge. “He’s with you?” she mouthed. Dak grinned.

“That’s really all we had to do?” Riq asked, his suspicion evident.

Rollo glanced over his shoulder toward the front of the church. “Well, that and get out of here as fast as possible. In about three minutes Siegfried’s men are coming in here after you. I can do a better job of barring the door, but if it didn’t keep me out you can bet they’ll get in eventually.”

Dak turned to Sera. “You ready?” he asked, holding out the SQuare. She glanced at Bill and swallowed, finally nodding.

“Where to?” she asked.

Riq took the SQuare and called up the information on the third Break. He traced his fingers lightly over a pattern of circles, his forehead furrowing.

Around them animals shifted in their makeshift stalls, a few sheep bleating their unease.

It had never taken the older boy this long to piece together a The Art of Memory puzzle. Previously, he’d only had to glimpse the pattern to ascertain the time and place of the next Break that needed to be fixed.

“We have to hurry,” Dak stressed. He was about to say more when Sera placed her hand on his arm, stopping him. The expression on her face was enough for Dak to know she wanted him to shut up and let Riq work.

Dak scowled — since when had Sera stood up for Riq over him?

He had certainly missed a lot in the past few days.

“I’ve got it!” Riq shouted. He tilted the screen to show the two of them, but it only looked like a random swirling pattern to Dak. He glanced at Sera, wondering if she saw something he didn’t, but she appeared just as confused.

“Washington, DC — former capital of the United States, in 1814. Looks like we’re headed to the War of 1812,” Riq explained.

A few days ago Dak would have been clapping his hands together with glee over the prospect of witnessing another battlefield firsthand. He’d spent so many afternoons daydreaming about what those places had been like in the heat of battle.

But he only sighed. “Another war,” he said dryly. “Awesome.”



## A Hasty Retreat

SERA FOCUSED on her fingers flying over the controls of the Infinity Ring because that way she didn't have to look at Bill. Every time she glanced over at him her stomach fluttered. To calm herself down she ran differential equations through her head, but it didn't seem to work the way it usually did.

"Oh, for the love of mincemeat," she muttered, angry at herself for spending the last few moments she had in the year 885 avoiding the fact that she'd gone and gotten a crush on the Hystorian.

As if he knew she was thinking of him, he slid down the wall to sit next to her where she'd found a quiet nook to program the Ring. Her fingers fumbled over the controls.

It didn't help that Dak and Riq kept peeking around the corner at her anxiously while the giant Viking paced back and forth, swinging his axe through the air.

And yet if Sera was honest with herself, she didn't want to go. Not yet. She cleared her throat, trying to think of something to say.

"That looks complicated," Bill said, staring at the Ring. She only nodded in response.

"Dak said you were the one to make it work." He ran his fingers through his dark hair and Sera wondered if he was as nervous as she felt. "That's pretty impressive."

“Thanks.” Sera’s fingers stilled on the controls.

Bill stared at the Ring. “I guess that means it’s all programmed and you’re ready to go?”

Was it just Sera or was there a hint of regret in his voice? She took a chance with her answer and told him the truth. “I finished programming it a couple of minutes ago.”

“Then why . . . ?” Bill’s face scrunched in confusion and then he seemed to understand what she was saying. That she’d pretended to keep working on the Infinity Ring to buy more time because she didn’t want to leave. “Oh!”

Sera had faced down a horde of *berserkr*s but turning toward Bill in that moment was one of the hardest things she’d done. “I wish you could go with us,” she murmured. She felt her cheeks blaze hot, but that was okay because she was pretty sure Bill was blushing, too.

He laid his hand on where hers gripped the Infinity Ring. “Me, too. But you know better than anyone what it means to be a Hystorian: My job is to stay behind and record what I know for future Hystorians. If I warp away with you, then the truth of what happened here will be lost.”

The thing was, Sera understood what he was saying and yet she still prickled at it. She remembered what Riq had said earlier about his parents, how being a Hystorian took over your life. She tried not to resent it. She knew how important their mission was — that the fate of the world rested with them — but that didn’t mean it didn’t stink sometimes.

“So what now?” she whispered.

He grinned and started to lean toward her, one of his hands reaching out. Her heart began to pound so loudly it drowned out the Vikings trying to force their way inside. “We enjoy the time we have left,” he offered.

Sera’s thoughts went in a thousand different directions at once as Bill came closer, wondering what was going to happen next. But it didn’t matter because right then Dak came around the corner, invading their bubble of privacy.

“Hey, did you know there’s an actual saint buried here? They say a saint’s bones never rot and instead emit a sweet odor, but when I took a whiff I didn’t

notice anything and it sure isn't doing a thing to cover up the stench of all those animals. . . ." Dak's voice trailed off when he realized he'd just interrupted something.

"In fact, I think that might be the woman who single-handedly rallied Paris against Attila and the Huns in 451. So," Dak continued as if he could salvage the situation, "that's pretty cool. I know how you like the stories about strong women from the past."

"Spare me the history lesson," Sera grumbled.

It didn't matter anyway. They were interrupted by a massive shattering and a series of shouts as Siegfried and his men stormed into the church.



Dak's world exploded into chaos.

"Stop them!" Siegfried roared at his men. Rollo stood between them, his sword, *Kettlingr*, raised. Beside him Vígi growled, baring her teeth as the hair rose along her back.

"Go!" Rollo shouted at them.

"But aren't you supposed to be on the same side as him?" Dak asked, indicating the enraged Siegfried. He knew that for their plan to work Rollo had to convince the other Vikings to leave Normandy alone, and he was afraid that this would ruin everything.

Rollo just smiled. "Vikings like Siegfried love to fight. Tomorrow he'll be thanking me for getting his blood moving. Now go!"

Dak didn't need to be told twice. But he also knew how stupid it would be for the three of them to warp away in front of prying eyes. He grabbed Sera and Riq, and pulled them deeper into the church and around behind a pen of squealing pigs.

"Is it programmed?" Dak pointed at the Infinity Ring still clutched in Sera's grasp. Footsteps pounded through the nave of the church, Vikings shoving cows and sheep out of the way as they searched for the three time travelers.

“Y-yes,” she stammered. She glanced at Bill, her face twisted with confusion and regret.

“Let’s get out of here!” Dak shouted. He waited for Sera to do whatever it was that would warp them away from 885 France. Nothing happened. The sound of enraged Vikings drew closer and closer. He caught glimpses of Rollo defending himself against four men at once while Vígi cornered two more.

It wasn’t until he saw Bill holding Sera’s hand that Dak realized what was causing the delay. “You’re going to have to let her go,” he said. “Unless you want to hitch a ride to 1814.”

“Sera,” Riq prodded, and Dak noticed that the voice he used with her was a lot softer than the one he used with him.

For a moment Sera stared at Bill and Bill stared back. Dak didn’t even begin to wonder what wordless exchange was going on between them. He huffed with impatience and finally reached for the Ring. “If you’re not going to do it, I will.”

Sera’s expression turned ferocious. It was actually pretty cool — he’d never seen her so angry (except for that one time they went to a paper presentation on proton decay in particle physics and the guy kept mixing up his quarks). But he’d much prefer it if her newfound ire weren’t directed at him.

She was forced to drop Bill’s hand to fight for control of the Ring. It was at that moment, while Dak and Sera were both distracted, that a familiar face stepped from the shadows in the back of the church, his bow held straight in front of him, string pulled taut.

Grom.

Time was up. Dak yanked the Ring from Sera’s hand and triggered the warp. But it was already too late.

The scar that cut from Grom’s eyebrow to his chin twisted his face as he smiled, letting the arrow fly. It sliced through the air almost in slow motion and it was aimed right at Sera.

“No!” screamed Bill. He launched himself directly into the path of the deadly arrow.

Time and space shimmered around the trio, a sucking sensation gathering in Dak's stomach as it began to pull him out of reality. The last thing he felt was something damp and cold nudging against his free hand.

The last thing he saw was the arrow piercing Bill's chest.

Even as they warped away he could hear Sera's panicked screaming.



## The Hitchhiker

THE FIRST thing Sera did when she felt solid ground under her feet was throw up. She fell to her knees, oblivious to the damp grass clutched under her fingers as she tried to calm her racing heart and steady her breathing.

*Bill.* She closed her eyes but she could still see the arrow piercing his chest. The last thing she'd seen of him was his body crumpling, the look on his face one of disbelief. Her stomach heaved again. They had to go back and make sure he was okay.

They *could* go back. The Infinity Ring made it possible.

Something wet brushed her cheek. She turned her head to the side only to be confronted by the smiling maw of a massive beast. It licked her again, its mouth smelling of overripe cabbage.

It whined and nudged her with its nose, almost knocking her over. She wondered if she could somehow still be disoriented from the warp and only imagining things . . . but then realized that her mind would never be able to conjure up a smell as rancid as that dog's breath.

Sera pushed herself to her feet. Her gaze rested on her companions. Riq stood with his arms crossed and one eyebrow raised as if he had a secret he couldn't wait to share.

Dak was completely out of place, his bare chest covered with mud and a wolf pelt wrapped around his shoulders. A wicked-looking axe dangled from



one hand while the other rested on the head of the massive beast.

She knew the expression on his face all too well. He'd done something wrong and was hoping she wouldn't notice.

She looked again at the dog and groaned. "Please tell me that creature didn't warp with us from 885 France?"

Dak tried to look contrite. "Her name's Vígi."

Sera pressed a hand to her face as Riq sang, "Someone's in trouble."

"I didn't mean for it to happen!" Dak defended himself. "She nosed my hand when we were warping — there's nothing I could have done."

"Fine," Sera finally managed. "We'll just take her back with us when we go to save Bill." She started programming the Ring.

Riq yanked it from her fingers before she could even input the first coordinate. "Hey!" she cried out, reaching for it, but he held it out of her grasp.

"We're not going back," the older boy said. All traces of his earlier smugness were gone, his expression one of utmost seriousness.

"But you saw what happened," Sera cried. "Bill's hurt — he could be dying."

"Well, technically he's already dead since we warped a millennium ahead," Dak offered.

Sera silenced him with a glare.

Still keeping the Ring out of reach, Riq said, "You said it yourself, Sera, we can't go to the same time and place twice or we could end up triggering the Cataclysm ourselves."

Sera hated having her words flung back in her face. "What I *said* was that every time we warped into a time or a place we caused ripples, but I didn't say they would always turn out catastrophic."

"Where do you draw the line?" Riq argued. "If we can use this thing to go anywhere and any time on a whim, why aren't we going back to 1925 when Pol Pot was born? Why save one guy when we could save six million by stopping Adolf Hitler?"

“We’re talking about *Bill*,” she sputtered. “The Hystorian who saved your life!”

Riq’s expression didn’t waver. “You know I’m right, Sera.”

She spun on her heel, stomping a few steps away. She wanted to punch something or scream or both. None of this was fair — Brint and Mari hadn’t prepared them for these types of challenges, and she didn’t know how to handle them.

She knew Riq was right. But what good was a time-travel device if she couldn’t save the people she cared about?

Lingering aftereffects of the Remnant she’d experienced in the church filtered through her mind, twisting around her heart. Sometime, someplace else there had to be other people she cared about, lost to the SQ’s quest for power. Tears blurred her vision and she crouched, pressing a hand over her face.

She hated people seeing her cry. Thankfully, the two boys stood behind her, silent and still, probably having no idea what to say or do. But that didn’t stop Vígi from padding over to her and leaning her warm body against Sera’s side. The massive dog whined, the sound so high-pitched it was almost beyond her hearing. Vígi had also just warped away from someone important to her. They were both sad.

Right then and there, Sera realized just how much she hated the SQ. Before, they’d been more like an opponent — someone she was racing against to save the future. But now, after what the Time Wardens had done to Bill, after what they’d taken away from her, the SQ had become her enemy.

She dug her fingers into the ground, using her newfound anger to ease the aching in her chest. Bill had died to protect her; how many other Hystorians had given their lives for this cause as well? The three of them were part of a legacy now, and they had no other option than to fulfill it to the best of their ability.

As if sensing how uneasy Sera’s thoughts had become, Vígi stood and began to pace, stopping every few steps to sniff at the air. Her ears swiveled, listening to the noises of the early morning around them.

Dak snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it!”

Sera looked up at him with unease. He wore that same expression he got whenever he was about to impart some sort of “imperative” historical fact. She loved how passionate her best friend was about history, but sometimes Sera wished he’d realize that his timing could be a bit off.

“Uh, guys?” Riq asked.

Dak ignored him, excitement brimming in his eyes. “I’ve been running it through in my head and I knew there was something about Rollo that seemed familiar.”

“I think that maybe —” Riq ventured, but Dak cut him off.

“Rollo told me his nickname was Walker, and because of the translation device I didn’t hear the word in Old Norse, which would be *Ganger*. I can’t believe I didn’t put this together earlier, but there’s a pretty famous Viking warrior — Ganger Hrolf.”

Upon hearing the name, Vígi’s tail began to wave furiously through the air. Dak seemed to take that as a good sign as he continued. “At first I thought it was a coincidence, but the thing about Vikings is that their record keeping was terrible — various historians refer to them with different names.”

Sera didn’t follow what Dak was saying and made a rolling motion with her hand for him to get to the point. “So?”

Beside her, Vígi resumed her pacing, every now and again stopping to nudge at Dak’s hand but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Seriously, guys —” Riq ventured again.

Dak looked from Riq to Sera. “Don’t you get it?”

They didn’t get it. Dak rolled his eyes. “It’s the same guy. Rollo is Hrolf, and I’ve read about Hrolf. I know exactly when and where he’s going to be in the summer of 911 — we can go back and return Vígi.”

“That history was in the old time stream, though,” Sera said. “We could have changed it.”

Dak shrugged. “It’s worth a try, though, isn’t it?”

The idea made Sera’s pulse pound harder. She might be able to find out what happened to Bill. Just thinking about him caused her chest to tighten.

“We really shouldn’t be jumping around too much in the time stream, though,” she offered halfheartedly, hoping Dak would wave away her concerns. “Even going back for a few minutes could cause ripples.”

“Hey!” Riq shouted, stepping between them. Sera finally registered the look of panic on his face. “Whatever we’re doing I suggest we do it fast.” He pointed over Sera’s shoulder and she turned to find a contingent of soldiers running toward them with weapons drawn.

As usual, Dak seemed utterly unconcerned, his mind instead turning to the fascination of a new time period. “What do you think they want?”

Riq rolled his eyes. “I’m guessing they’re wondering what a black boy, a savage, a wolf, and a girl wearing a medieval tunic are all doing on the front lawn of the White House.”



## Old Friends

DAK DIDN'T dare interrupt Sera as her fingers flew over the Infinity Ring, plugging in the date (July 20, 911) and location (the colline de Lèves) he'd given her. He still carried the axe from 885 Paris, but the weapon would be useless against the men bearing down on them. They carried rifles with bayonets on them.

Vígi planted herself in front of Dak, her lips drawn back and body vibrating with a growl. He kept his hand tangled in her ruff, worried that she might bolt after the soldiers. If that happened, they'd never get her back to her master.

Finally Sera cried out, "Got it." She grabbed Riq with one hand, and Riq held on to Dak, and then the world around them began to shimmer and twist. Dak still wasn't used to the way his stomach dropped and his skin seemed to tighten as they warped through time.

It was as if his body knew they were doing something unnatural, and was protesting. It didn't help matters that he had no idea what he'd just gotten them into. According to the history he'd read, the three of them should be warping into the middle of a Viking camp while Rollo celebrated the defeat of the town of Chartres.

Except that he couldn't stop thinking about what Sera had said and it made him uneasy. Of course their involvement in the Siege of Paris had

changed history — that was the point of going back to fix the Breaks.

What if the Battle of Chartres never happened? What if Rollo wasn't there? Realizing that the history he knew and understood so intimately no longer existed was more disorienting than the feeling of being whipped through time.

These thoughts still whirled through Dak's mind as everything around him grew still. They stood on the slope of a hill in the darkness, only a sliver of moon and wash of stars overhead to light their surroundings.

Sera let out a long breath. "This looks right," she whispered.

Dak heard the soft murmur of voices from somewhere up the hill and felt Vígi tense under his fingers. She raised her head, sniffing at the air. Curious, Dak sniffed, too. He smelled woodsmoke and copper, dirt and sweat.

Before he could get a better grip on the dog, she bolted. Dak didn't think twice before chasing after her. As he ran he heard Sera and Riq following, crashing through the underbrush.

The dog slowed at the edge of a clearing, her steps silent in the night, and Dak did his best to quiet his own steps. But Sera and Riq weren't as stealthy as they tried to catch up, and it was no surprise when a cluster of burly Viking warriors intercepted them and began asking questions.

Instinctively, Dak felt his fingers tighten around his own axe to defend himself and his friends — then he realized that the Vikings didn't seem to be paying him any attention. Only belatedly did he remember he was still dressed as a *berserkr* from the battle in Paris; he was actually blending in.

Vígi paused and whined, and for a moment Dak felt torn between his friends and the dog. His mind was made up when Vígi pressed her nose against the back of Dak's knee, urging him forward. "They're with me," he called over his shoulder as he continued running.

The center of the camp was subdued — nothing like Dak would have expected after such a huge victory as the Battle of Chartres had been. A knot of unease began to tighten in his stomach.

A giant of a Viking sat in front of the remains of a fire, the glowing embers casting shadows on his face. His shoulders were slumped, his empty

hands hanging limp and his hair graying to white. Dak knew it must be Rollo — who else could be so massive? — but this man bore little resemblance to the laughing, high-spirited warrior Dak knew.

Whatever the three of them had done to change history hadn't been kind to Rollo, Dak realized.

He slowed his approach, but Vígi showed no such hesitation. She raced across the clearing, tongue lolling from her mouth, and then leapt through the air, landing fully against the Viking's chest and pushing him from his stool.

The man fell to the ground with a crash, the dog crouched over him. She tilted her head back and let loose with a happy howl before lapping at his face.

“Ugh, ick!” he grumbled, and Dak smiled at the reversal.

The giant pushed to his elbows, no easy feat with a one-hundred-fifty-plus pound dog perched on one's chest. “Vígi?” he whispered, his voice almost cracking. Dak wasn't sure, but he thought the warrior's eyes might have been glistening.

The beast's tail thumped heartily, her face breaking into a grin that bared every single gleaming tooth. She licked at the Viking again. “Only one dog I know with breath as vile as that,” he muttered, scratching at the dog's ears. “But how?”

His gaze snapped up, landing on Dak. Rollo's face lit up. “My time-traveling friend!” he said, rising to his feet. He pulled Dak into a hug that felt like it might have cracked several ribs.

“Come! Join me at the fire and tell me of your travels,” Rollo boomed. He motioned over Dak's head, and Dak turned to find Sera and Riq being escorted into camp. They seemed to visibly relax when they saw Vígi sitting happily by Rollo's side.

“We just needed to run this one errand and really don't have time to sit and chat —” Dak started to say.

Rollo roared with laughter. “With your shiny Ring, all you have is time.”

While Riq and Dak chuckled, Sera stepped forward, her face grim and serious. She twisted her hands together in front of her anxiously. “I know it

was a long time ago for you,” she said. “But when we warped away a boy by the name of Billfrith was there in the church and he was hurt. Do you know what happened to him?”

Rollo’s eyebrows drew together, his expression one of curiosity. He cupped one hand around his mouth and shouted, “Bill!” before turning back to Sera and saying, “Why don’t you let him tell you?”





## The Horns of War (Again)

SERA WAS pretty sure her heart stopped beating. Her hands tightened until her nails dug into her palms. The echo of Rollo shouting Bill's name resounded in her ears.

*There's no way,* she thought as her pulse stuttered and began to gallop.

From behind her she heard someone whisper, "Sera?" The voice was just as she remembered it, causing her cheeks to heat and a smile to break across her face.

He was not only alive but she got to see him again! It was beyond her wildest dreams!

She was already calling out his name as she spun on her heel and came face-to-face with a man who looked to be as old as her uncle. His hair thinned around his temples, and wrinkles crowded the corners of his eyes.

She choked on his name. Of course he was older, her mind tried to reason. While she'd just left him no more than twenty minutes ago, he'd lived an entire life apart from her.

She heard herself cry out as her eyes blurred with tears.

Bill reached out a hand toward her, tentatively, but it was the way a father might move to comfort a child.

Sera turned and fled.

She didn't get far into the woods before reason pulled her up short. It was dark, and she was near a battlefield. It was stupid of her to continue running. She pressed her back against a tree and sank to the ground. Blindly, she stared at her hands in her lap.

Less than an hour ago Bill had twined his fingers through hers. He'd leaned toward her and she'd thought she might be about to experience her first kiss. Her stomach twisted as her brain warred between the two time lines, trying to orient her.

She heard Bill coming even before he called out her name, softly. She closed her eyes — his voice really was exactly the same as she remembered. For a moment she was convinced he'd appear as he'd been before.

But when she opened her eyes he stood there, still so much older. He sat down next to her.

“This is strange, isn't it?” he asked.

She could only nod.

“I thought about you after . . .” He took a deep breath and ran his hand through his graying hair, such a familiar gesture. “In my mind you were growing older, just like I was. Seeing you now, exactly how you were when you left . . .” He trailed off.

Sera forced a swallow. She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. “What happened? The last I saw you'd been hit by an arrow.”

“I got lucky. It was a clean wound — didn't hit anything important.” He eased the collar of his tunic aside and in the soft glow of the night Sera saw a puckered scar. “Rollo was able to fend off the rest of Siegfried's men. He waited until dark to take me back to the camp and dress the wound. That's when we put two and two together and realized that his great-grandfather is the one who saved my great-great-great-uncle. Once we realized all we had in common, I joined up with him.

“I thought Siegfried would be angry after Rollo let you guys escape, but once Rollo told him that there was a lot of land worth plundering down the Seine in Burgundy and that he'd let Siegfried have it all, that seemed to smooth things over. Then they went their separate ways — Siegfried and his

men carrying their ships overland to farther down the river, and Rollo staying behind outside Paris for a while until King Charles the Fat finally paid him to leave.”

He picked up a stick from the ground and began to break it into smaller segments. “It feels like it was ages ago.” After a pause he asked, “How has it been saving the future?”

Sera still didn’t lift her eyes. “We haven’t been. When we realized Vígi had hitched a ride we came back here to return her. I . . .” She swallowed with effort. “I thought you’d been killed trying to save my life.”

He reached out and lifted her chin with a finger. “If I had died for you, it would have been worth it. The cause of the Hystorians means everything to me.”

She realized, then, that’s what she’d been to him. Not a girl he liked, but a part of a larger cause that needed protecting. She stood abruptly. “I need to get back to the others. We shouldn’t even have come to this time — it’s dangerous to interfere.”

“Wait.” He stood, but age had made him slower and she was already several steps away. “There’s something you should know.”

Her shoulders tensed. She just wanted to leave, for this whole night to end. She wanted to remember Bill as he’d been before, not this stranger.

“You told me that in order to fix the Break the Vikings had to be kept away from Normandy, right?” he asked.

Sera nodded without turning to face him. “If Siegfried went to Burgundy instead, then we did our job.”

“Siegfried recently changed his mind,” Bill said. “That’s why we’re here. Rollo’s trying to fight his way into Normandy by way of Chartres. But he lost the battle today —”

Sera spun toward him. “Dak said Rollo won Chartres. That’s why we came here.”

Bill shook his head. “We lost today, Sera. And this was Rollo’s last chance to get ahead of Siegfried.”



“We have a problem,” Dak said as soon as he saw Sera striding back into camp. She didn’t look happy to see him, but that had never stopped Dak before.

“If this is about cheese, so help me . . .”

“Rollo lost the battle today,” he said, keeping his voice low. Dak still couldn’t get over the changes in his Viking friend’s appearance. Where before he’d strode through camp with his wide shoulders thrown back and chin high, now he slumped forward on his stool, staring at the fire. Every now and again Vígi would nudge his hand with her nose and he’d smile down at her, but Dak knew that his defeat earlier today had been a crushing blow.

And it shouldn’t have happened. It wouldn’t have if Dak, Sera, and Riq hadn’t been mucking around in history. By getting Rollo involved, they’d practically ruined his life.

Dak glanced around the clearing and lowered his voice even more. “Rollo said the Franks have surrounded the hill. They’ve completely cut him off from water . . . and his ships. If they attack, he has no hope of fending them off.”

Riq strolled over just in time to hear this last bit. “Then I’d say now would be a fine time for us to fire up the Infinity Ring and catch the first warp out of here.”

“We can’t,” Sera said simply. For once Dak and Riq were on the same page as they both stared at her with confusion.

“Come again?” Riq asked, taking the words right out of Dak’s mouth.

Dak noticed Sera glancing over her shoulder to where Bill hovered around the edges of camp. “It’s worse than you realize,” she whispered.

“Worse than being sitting ducks for an army three times our size?” Dak asked.

She leveled her gaze at him and Dak’s stomach sank. He knew that expression. It was the same one she’d worn just before their fourth-grade

science fair when she'd found out she wasn't the only student who'd thought of using demotic technology to monitor household energy use.

“Siegfried's marching on Normandy and there are other SQ Vikings behind him ready to take his place if he falls,” she said. “Rollo was headed there to try to stop them. But the Franks have this hill surrounded, and if he can't find a way out, he won't be able to confront Siegfried. And we'll have failed to fix the Break.”



## Old Enemies

IF THERE'S one thing that always calmed Sera it was losing herself in the intricacies of physics. The world could be falling apart outside (and with all the earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes roaring about it in the twenty-first century, it sometimes was) and she'd never notice. She'd always had the ability to focus in on problems with a laser-like precision and she hated nothing more than failing to come up with a proper solution.

After all, she was the girl who'd stayed up for two days straight figuring out the previously unsolvable Yang–Mills existence and mass gap problem.

But now she didn't have two days to figure out a solution to their situation; she was lucky if she had two hours before dawn came and the Franks attacked. Rollo and his men had been arguing much of the night, Dak interjecting at times, trying to figure out how a few thousand Viking warriors could fight their way past tens of thousands of Frankish and Burgundian soldiers.

They'd all come to the same conclusion: It wasn't possible. Every avenue of retreat had been cut off by the Franks. Even though the fleet of Viking ships floated less than a league away, it might as well have been the distance to the moon.

Yet a feeling in Sera's stomach told her she was missing something obvious. She stood from the fire and walked slowly through camp. Everything

was so quiet and subdued, nothing like their previous battle experience, full of urgency and hasty preparations.

A part of her missed the noise. Even though it had been terrifying at the time, there had been something thrilling about the clanging Parisian church bells and the blaring Viking horns signaling the start of battle.

Sera froze, one foot still suspended in the air. “That’s it,” she said out loud to no one. She laughed at how perfect of a solution it was as she raced back to Dak and Rollo.

She was winded when she found them in front of the fire. “The horns,” she blurted excitedly. “We may not have enough men to fight the Franks, but they don’t have to know that. Dak, Riq, and I will sneak into their camps with battle horns and start sounding them — the Franks will assume they’re under attack and scatter. In the confusion, you run for the ships!”

She beamed with pride.

Rollo scowled. “I’m not sending kids into the enemy camp,” he grumbled.

Dak bristled at being called a kid, but before he could complain Sera piped up.

“No one would ever suspect the three of us,” she argued. “If the Franks find a Viking wandering in the woods they’ll get suspicious and everything will be ruined. But if it’s just us . . .” She shrugged. “We’re kids, how much trouble could we be?”



Dak was glad that before leaving the Viking camp he’d finally been able to change out of his wolf pelt, replacing it with dark leggings and a thick cloak pulled from an injured Frankish soldier. His familiar axe still rested at his hip, and in his hands he carried a large war horn.

Clouds had rolled in while they’d debated the details of Sera’s plan. Now, even though dawn was imminent, the night was pitch-black, which made navigation rather difficult. Dak had never been a particularly graceful individual and not being able to see where he was going wasn’t helping

matters. Every step he took seemed to bring with it a cacophony of cracking branches that caused him to jump (which only set off more noises).

After finally agreeing to the plan (it took a lot of arguing), Rollo warned the three time travelers not to get too near to the Frankish camps. They'd likely have guards posted, he warned, and they couldn't risk getting caught.

At first Dak obeyed this command but the longer he waited out past the edge of the camps, the more restless he became. After all, he was a historian first and foremost, and he saw it as his duty to properly record what he witnessed throughout time. He'd already begun drafting his magnum opus, titled *The Time Lord*, which, he was quite sure, would establish him as the preeminent authority on all things historical.

Besides, it was boring out in the woods alone. His mind made up (not that he took much convincing), Dak moved toward the Frankish camp. The closer he got without anyone sounding an alarm, the bolder he grew.

He kept himself tucked low as he advanced through a collection of lean-tos, pausing every now and again to listen to the snores of the soldiers. His heart pounded with a mixture of fear and excitement.

Dak was just peeking his head into a crudely built cabin when he heard the first horn blow: Sera. The sound sputtered at first and then gained in volume and urgency. Another horn joined in: Riq.

Already the sound of mumbling and surprise drifted among the soldiers scattered throughout the tents and bedrolls littered around the camp. A few men popped to their feet, weapons already drawn.

There was no time for Dak to sneak back out to the thick woods and so he did the only thing he could: hunkered down behind the nearest tree and blew his horn as hard and loud as possible.

It looked easier than it was. At first the instrument only let out a wheezing, choking sound. Dak's cheeks began to blaze hot and red with the effort, his head spinning with light-headedness as he heaved in another breath. He changed the shape of his mouth and that did the trick: The horn let out a horrid, piercing wail.



Whoever hadn't been woken by the other horns was certainly awake now. Soldiers sprang from their bedrolls, some of them yanking on shoes, some of them reaching for weapons, but most merely fleeing.

"The North Men are attacking!" Dak yelled, encouraging their panic. "Retreat!" His warning spread like wildfire, and Dak heard it repeated again and again. Soldiers scrambled, fleeing the camp so fast that Dak couldn't help laughing in between bouts of blowing the war horn.

The ruse had worked; the Frankish army was in disarray, which is exactly what the Vikings needed to break toward the river. He couldn't wait to meet up with Sera and congratulate her on such a brilliant plan. Especially since he'd never really been convinced it would work in the first place.

With a smile on his face, Dak turned toward the cover of the forest — when a hand suddenly clamped on his shoulder. Dak reached for his axe, but he was disarmed immediately and found himself pinned to the ground, staring up at the dawn-tinged sky.

A figure hovered over him, sharp knee digging against Dak's ribs. "If it isn't my old nemesis," the man said. "You don't seem to have aged a day."

He hauled Dak to his feet and dragged him toward a fire. As the light spilled over the man's face, illuminating the scar that slashed from his left eyebrow to the right corner of his mouth, Dak felt his insides twist.

Even though the past twenty-five years had added wrinkles and age spots to the soldier's face, Dak recognized Gorm instantly. The aged man yanked Dak's hands behind his back, tying them tightly with a length of rope he'd been using as a belt.

"You don't have to do that," Dak muttered.

The Time Warden barked out a laugh. "That's what the man and woman said, too. And since they were older I believed them. That's the last time I trust anyone from the future."

Dak's heart froze. He swallowed. "A man and woman? From the future?" It could only be his parents.

"Head still hurts from where the woman conked me with a rock," Gorm grumbled. Then he gave Dak an evil look. "I'm not taking any chances this

time.”



## Inheritance

SUDDENLY, NOTHING mattered more to Dak than getting back to Sera and Riq. And if that meant leading the Time Warden right to where Rollo and his men were clambering into their ships, so be it.

He had to tell Sera about his parents. If the knot on Gorm's head was as fresh as it looked, they'd been here only an hour or two ago. They could *still* be here, somewhere. It took everything Dak had not to start calling out for them in the dusky dawn.

If the Time Warden was suspicious that Dak offered only a halfhearted resistance before giving in to his demands to be taken to the Vikings, he didn't show it. Instead he just trudged along behind Dak, recounting how losing the time travelers in 885 had caused Siegfried to banish him and how miserable his life with the Frankish army had been ever since.

Dak didn't care and he barely listened.

"Siegfried took my sword, *Leggbítr*," Gorm grumbled. "Do you know what it's like for a Norseman to have his weapon taken from him?"

When Dak didn't answer Gorm prodded him in the back to elicit the correct response. Dak shook his head.

"Humiliating. *Leggbítr* was my father's sword and his father's before him. And what do I have to pass on to my own son?"

Dak glanced back at the Time Warden, wondering if his son had inherited his thick nose and drooping ears. If so, he should be glad to get nothing else from his father.

Another shove to the back and Dak mumbled, “What?” He tried not to think about what Sera and Riq would say when he led the enemy into their midst. He was being stupid and he knew it and yet he didn’t turn back.

“Nothing,” Gorm barked. “That is, until I trade that magical metal device to Siegfried. You take me to camp, you give me the thingy, and maybe I let you live. Deal?”

As if to emphasize his point, Gorm swung his axe through the air, cleanly slicing a thick limb from a nearby tree. His message was clear: If things didn’t go well, that could be Dak’s neck. He shivered, trying to shake off Gorm’s all-too-real threat.

When Sera realized what Dak was doing she was going to be so ticked off. But that didn’t matter to Dak right now. What mattered was figuring out how to find his parents again.



“He should be here by now,” Sera hissed. She walked in tight circles along the shore of the misty Eure River while Riq sat along the bank skipping rocks across the water. It was a cloud-choked morning and the stones sailed into the gray before sinking.

“It’s Dak,” Riq answered. “I’d be surprised to see him again before noon.”

Sera whirled on him, crossing her arms over her chest. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

One of Riq’s rocks sank into the water with a loud *sploosh*. He lifted a shoulder. “Only that it’s Dak. We let him go alone to an enemy camp. I figured we had a fifty-fifty chance he wouldn’t do something stupid and get caught.”

Sera felt her blood boil hot in indignation and then drain from her cheeks in worry. “Dak’s smarter than that. I’m sure he learned his lesson last time,” she said.

“When hasn’t he gotten in trouble? Alone *or* with us? Look, I understand the dude’s fascination with history — this whole trip must be like a field day to him. But he’s not exactly smart about avoiding risks and taking precautions.”

Sera wanted to argue. She even opened her mouth, ready to defend Dak. But nothing came out. The truth was, Riq was right.

With a huff, Sera turned her back and resumed her pacing. Just downriver Rollo and his men were piling supplies into their tethered boats and preparing to cast off. With so many men, it would be a long and involved process but if Sera, Riq, and Dak wanted to be with them when they left, they had to be ready soon.

It wouldn’t be long before the Franks realized that the Viking attack had been nothing but a ruse and then they’d regroup and come after them. She really didn’t want to stick around to see what an enraged Frank looked like in this century.

For a while longer, Sera began to pace and then she stopped in front of Riq. Losing Dak wasn’t the only problem occupying her mind.

“Do you think getting Rollo out of here is enough to fix the Break?” she asked.

Riq just shook his head.

“And you’re basing that on . . . ?”

Riq looked up at her and she glimpsed something familiar in his eyes.

“My Remnants are getting worse,” he confessed.

Sera winced. “That bad?”

Riq tried to laugh but the sound came out forced and choked. Sera sat next to him, watching his face closely.

“You never told me what your Remnants were about,” she said.

Riq scratched at the ground, searching for another rock. “There’s nothing to really say about them. Nothing concrete I can describe.”

“Mine were like that, too, at first,” Sera said. “They were just feelings but eventually I started to understand what those feelings meant.” She hesitated before prodding. “What’s the feeling you get from yours?”

Riq pushed himself to his feet and stretched, throwing his arms high overhead. “Nothing,” he said when he was done.

Sera hated the attitude in his voice. “Fine, if you don’t want to share then don’t.” She stood and walked away. “I’m going after Dak,” she said.



## Caught

DAK GRITTED his teeth in frustration. He didn't care so much that his hands were tied behind his back, or that the Time Warden now carried Dak's axe, or even that his parents might be nearby but he didn't know where.

All of those things he could deal with. What angered him was that he'd just heard a familiar voice call his name. Sera had never been one for subtlety and she crashed around in the forest sounding like his uncle Dick after eating Aunt Lou's world-famous six-bean casserole.

Dak tried to cough every time he heard her voice to distract the Time Warden but that only served to make Gorm send strange looks his way. Dak could hear the edge of panic in Sera's voice. It was careless of her to be wandering around in the woods looking for him. There was a Frankish army on the run, what if she stumbled on them instead?

Eventually, Gorm figured it out. He jerked on Dak's arms, pulling him to a stop. "Sounds like your friend's worried about you," he said, nudging Dak with his elbow.

Dak fumed but when the Time Warden raised the axe to Dak's neck and ordered him to call out for Sera, he had no choice but to obey. "Sera Froste!" he shouted, hoping that by using her full name she'd be suspicious and figure something was up.

They really should have figured out some sort of code word for situations like this. Though perhaps it would be better to try avoiding situations like this altogether.

Sera was one of the smartest people Dak knew — other than himself, of course — but she was more of what he'd call book smart rather than street smart (or in this case, forest smart). So he shouldn't have been surprised when she came crashing through the underbrush, winded and unarmed.

The Time Warden was delighted to see her. "Well, now it's getting interesting, isn't it?"

She drew up short, her eyes going wide as she glanced from Gorm to the axe to Dak with his hands tied behind his back. All she said was, "Uh-oh."

*Uh-oh, indeed*, Dak thought. Now all they needed was for Riq to join them and it could be a party.

As if summoned by Dak's thoughts, the older boy stumbled into the clearing, just as unarmed as Sera.

"Oh, for the love of mincemeat," Dak muttered, using Sera's favorite phrase. She glared at him.

"You didn't bring any weapons, or perhaps a Viking or twenty as backup, did you?" Dak asked hopefully.

At least Sera had the decency to look sheepish as she shrugged and said, "All the men were busy."

*Great*, Dak thought. Now Gorm knew no one was coming to rescue them. This morning was getting worse and worse.

Which of course is a phrase only uttered moments before things do indeed become worse. Gorm knocked Dak to the ground and stepped forward, resting the axe against Sera's stomach. Using delicacy that Dak never could have thought possible with such an unwieldy weapon, the Time Warden sliced the leather sack from her belt.

The Infinity Ring had been their last bargaining chip. Now that it was in the Time Warden's possession, the three time travelers were completely out of options.





For a moment Sera wondered if perhaps her luck had run out. She'd already come up with one successful ruse tonight and she wasn't confident she'd be able to pull off another. She was pretty sure that fear showed on her face, which is part of why it was so easy to convince the Time Warden that she and Riq were the only people in the woods coming after Dak.

Also, technically, that was a true statement. Not that Sera was one for lying, but she was very much a stickler for details and precision. Dak had asked her if there were any Viking men assisting them with backup and she was quite confident in answering no.

But that didn't mean she didn't have other tricks up her sleeve. She hoped.

Even so, feeling the sharp edge of the Time Warden's blade against her and watching as he plucked the Infinity Ring away was quite worrying.

What if she'd miscalculated? If the next few moments went wrong, the three of them could lose all ties to the future, fail in their quest to fix the Breaks, and even possibly lose their lives.

The Time Warden pulled the Infinity Ring from its bag and sniffed it before putting it between his teeth and biting. Pretty much everyone in the clearing winced at the sound of a tooth cracking.

"Hydroxylapatite-infused bone really isn't much of a match against titanium," Sera cautioned.

The Time Warden glared at her and raised his axe. She took a hasty step back but wasn't fast enough — Gorm grabbed her by the arm.

Her gaze shifted to Dak and what she saw there made her remaining confidence waver. He was well and truly terrified and, with his arms tied behind his back, there was nothing he could do to defend himself. Or her.

Riq tried to step forward and situate himself between Sera and the Time Warden but that only made the older man angrier and caused him to push the blade against her throat. With every swallow she felt the keen edge of it, and her mind couldn't stop cycling through just how much force and pressure it would take for him to sever something important.

He was nervous, that much was clear, and Sera knew well enough that a man on edge was liable to take desperate measures. Especially since he had the Infinity Ring in his grasp.

Something shifted in the woods to her left, a dark shape creeping through the darkness. Seeing it, Sera's heart began to pound wildly. This was her chance, the moment she'd planned for. She had to take action and she had to do it now. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and crossed her fingers, hoping that her luck hadn't run out after all.

If she failed, it wasn't just their lives at stake, but the fate of the world.



## Admitting Defeat

“VÍGI,” SERA shouted. She pointed her finger at the Time Warden and added the command, “Dinner!” For a moment nothing happened and Sera’s breath hitched as her lungs felt impossibly tight.

Growing up, Sera’s uncle had never allowed her to have a pet and so she’d always looked at dogs and cats with a certain amount of puzzlement. She didn’t understand why someone would invite a wild creature into their home and attempt to interact with it on a daily basis.

But over the past day she’d begun to understand the bond between a dog and its master, especially after seeing how desperate and depressed Vígi became when she was separated from Rollo.

Not to mention the way the Viking chieftain’s eyes lit up when he saw his beloved beast again. It was like watching a father reunite with a long-lost child.

At this moment in time, though, as Vígi propelled herself into the clearing, Sera could have kissed that dog, horrid breath notwithstanding.

The Time Warden didn’t even have a chance to prepare himself before the massive beast leapt through the air, tackling him to the ground and placing her mouth around his throat.

He froze as Vígi’s teeth pressed gently against his skin. Sera noticed Dak wince — he’d already told the story of being pinned by Vígi the first time he

met her and how terrifying the experience had been.

“You hungry, girl?” Sera asked, enjoying the look of panic on Gorm’s face. She wasn’t sure which was worse for the man: the dog’s teeth at his throat or her breath so close to his nose.

She ran her hand along the dog’s bristled back in thanks as she bent to snatch the axe from the Time Warden’s hands. It didn’t take long to slice through the ropes binding Dak’s hands behind his back.

Newly freed, Dak knelt to give Vígi a good scratching behind her ears. The dog’s tail swung happily through the air in response.

“Are you going to behave?” Sera asked, looming over the fallen Viking. “Or shall I let this fine dog enjoy her meal?”

The man’s face burned red. “I’m not the only one, you know,” he hissed. “Kill me if you want, but there are others like me after you and none of them have a reason to see you kept alive. You don’t even know what mistake you’ve made here today.”

Sera started to answer when Dak leaned in close, all playfulness draining from his face. “Where are my parents? The couple you saw earlier — where did they go?”

It was such an unexpected question that Sera gasped.

Apparently, her reaction was all the Time Warden needed. A slow grin broke across his face. In response Vígi’s jaws tightened ever so slightly, making the man wince.

Sera glanced at Dak, urging him to look up at her. Usually they had the ability to almost read each other’s thoughts. There were times they were so in sync it’s like they shared the same brain (albeit his tended to focus on more esoteric historical details while hers was firmly rooted in scientific fact).

Now, they were almost like strangers. Sera couldn’t begin to guess what was going through Dak’s mind. The expression on his face, a mix of despair and rage, was one she’d never seen before.

Gorm chuckled. “So it seems there might be something the young time traveler wants after all.” Even with his life at stake, the Time Warden

managed to lift one eyebrow. “What are you willing to trade for that information?”

In the distance she heard men calling out orders, the Frankish army regrouping and setting off toward the Viking encampment along the river. They were running out of time.

“Dak,” she said, plucking at the edge of his cloak. “We have to go.”

When he looked up at her, his face was twisted in desperation. “It’s my parents, Sera. I know you don’t understand but . . .”

He must have seen the way his words dug into her heart because he trailed off. Riq cleared his throat then, making his presence known. He knew enough about Sera’s Remnants to realize how much Dak’s words stung.

She *did* understand what it was like to miss your parents. Every time her stomach twisted and the world tilted into a Remnant, that’s what she felt. She was always aware of the gap in her life left by her parents’ deaths.

“Let’s go,” Riq murmured. Sera knew he was right. The Franks were drawing closer and if the Time Warden was telling the truth, more SQ cronies were embedded in the army coming after them.

She tugged harder at Dak. He hesitated and then she felt him give in. Vígi stood her ground, keeping the Time Warden pinned so they could get away without being followed. As the three time travelers ran into the woods the man shouted, “You can’t escape the SQ. Through time and space — we’ll always be a step ahead!”



The three of them didn’t say much as they fled up-river toward the fleet of Viking ships, which suited Dak just fine. He’d been impressed by Sera’s quick thinking — even he’d been duped by her ruse — but that couldn’t take his mind off his parents.

They’d made it to the band of Vikings and were being escorted onto one of the ships when Dak stopped short, holding Sera and Riq back. “What if Gorm actually knows where my parents are? We might be leaving the only real lead we have to finding them.”

Men bustled around them, loading up the ships and setting their shields along the strakes for protection. The first light of morning was still struggling just above the horizon and a soft mist curled up from the surface of the river. Rollo's ship had already pushed from the bank and unfurled its sail, the crisp dawn air making the bright red cloth flutter. He let out a sharp whistle, calling for his dog.

"The fact that he saw your parents only confirms our theory about the Breaks," Sera said, out of breath from running. He could tell she was trying to be patient with him, though an edge still crept into her voice. "They're drawn to the Breaks. If we don't find them here and now, we'll have another chance. I just know it."

Dak wanted to believe her but . . . "But this wasn't supposed to be a Break," he told her. "We went back to 885 to fix it — we were never supposed to be here. In fact, we *wouldn't* be here if it weren't for Vígi."

Instead of responding, Sera strode toward one of the ships and let a burly Viking boost her on board.

"Wait," Dak called after her. The boat was packed with people and supplies, and Dak had to thread his way through large men preparing to cast off. When he finally caught up with Sera in the bow she wouldn't meet his eye. "What aren't you telling me?" he asked.

"I think the Hystorians sent us to the wrong time in the first place," she answered softly. "I don't think we were ever meant to be at the Siege of Paris after all."



## Learning from Dogs

DAK COULD tell how much Sera disliked admitting that they might have made a mistake and apparently Riq felt the same. He scowled. “I decoded that clue correctly,” he told them. “I may be younger than Brint and Mari, but I understand The Art of Memory and how to use it. It’s just like any other language,” he grumbled.

Sera sighed. “I’m not saying you were wrong, it’s just . . .” She ran a hand through her hair and seemed surprised to find it so short. She frowned and Dak remembered how much she’d loved her long hair. Her uncle had once told her it made her look like her mother.

He hadn’t realized just how much she was sacrificing when she allowed Gloria the Hystorian to cut it off during their first mission.

The ship pulled away from shore, men bent over the oars to push them against the current. The movement jolted Dak and he grabbed for the nearest bench to steady himself. Already he could hear the sound of the approaching Frankish soldiers and see shadows of armed men running through the trees along the riverbank.

“I think that Brint and Mari might have gotten it wrong,” Sera told him. “Which means we can’t rely on the Square nearly as much as we have been.”

Dak felt entirely too exposed and vulnerable, even though the river around them was filled with ships, each one teeming with Vikings aiming bows and

arrows toward the shore. “We really don’t know what we’re doing, do we?”

Sera cringed at the question. He knew Sera hated when she didn’t know something, and it was even worse when someone pointed it out, especially a friend.

Riq stepped forward, his hands fisted. “We’re doing the best we can,” he said. “Sera’s saved your butt more times than I can count — even when you didn’t realize it. We were under a lot of pressure to warp away when you were out gallivanting with the Vikings. But we didn’t.”

Dak tried to catch Sera’s eyes, wondering if this was true, but she avoided his gaze.

“Whatever,” he eventually mumbled. “Let’s just get to the next Break and start looking for my parents again. Is the Ring already programmed?”

Sera and Riq traded a glance, something Dak was getting really tired of. He hated feeling out of the loop.

She took a deep breath. “There’s a problem with that,” she started. “My Remnants have been getting worse. Riq and I both think it means we haven’t fixed anything yet.”

“But we kept Siegfried from controlling Normandy,” Dak argued. “Now his descendants won’t conquer Great Britain and establish dominance throughout Europe. Isn’t that what we were supposed to do?”

“We just delayed the inevitable. Now Siegfried is going to Normandy by way of Burgundy instead of Paris. The result is the same.” Sera began to pace. It’s what she always did when she was frustrated that a solution to a problem was escaping her.

“The SQ knew what they were doing when they aligned with the Vikings,” Riq added. “They’re crazy good warriors. If they want Normandy, they’re going to take it. Even if Rollo gets there first, they’ll just end up fighting him for it. And since our Remnants haven’t gotten any better, it’s a pretty good bet Siegfried and his men will win. We had our chance to fix things before and we blew it. As far as I can tell, there’s nothing we can do to stop the SQ now.”





*Giving up* was not a phrase in Sera's vocabulary. But her scientific mind required that she base her actions on facts and those were starting to add up against her.

Everything should have led Sera to the conclusion that they'd failed. But she just couldn't believe that. She'd identified a tenth dimension in string theory because she'd been unwilling to give up and she wasn't about to start doing that now.

That still didn't mean she had any solutions to their current predicament.

She saw Bill pushing his way through the men on the ship, finding his way to her. Her stomach twisted every time she looked at him, trying to reconcile the Bill she knew before with who he was now. He was an old man and she couldn't figure out how to relate to him. The day before he'd been a friend and confidant. Now . . . she didn't know what he was now.

She turned away and looked out over the water so that she didn't have to meet his eyes.

"We have word that King Charles the Simple's army is marshaling troops upriver and the Franks are regrouping behind us," he told them. "They'll both be striking out for us soon. It won't be safe here much longer. Rollo intends to fight, but even if we're successful I'm afraid we don't have much hope of stopping Siegfried's forces. You may want to move on before things get messy."

"Yeah," Riq quipped. "Because warping into yet another war zone is so appealing."

Dak seemed to ignore him, as usual. "What's the king doing in this part of France?" Sera rolled her eyes. Leave it to her best friend to turn any moment into a quest for more historical knowledge.

"Oh, he's been trying to draft some sort of treaty between the Norsemen and the Franks to keep them from constantly fighting but so far he's been unsuccessful. . . ."

Bill continued his history lesson, Dak hanging on every word, but Sera was distracted by the sight of Vígi loping up the riverbank alongside them, licking her chops as if she'd just enjoyed a fine meal.

Rollo's boat was at the head of the mass of ships, its sail full and oars slicing through the water. From the helm the giant Viking chieftain let out another piercing whistle that caused the dog's ears to perk and flick in his direction.

Vígi's muscles bunched and she raced toward the river, claws digging through the mud. She didn't even hesitate at the water's edge, just dove in with a splash and began to paddle furiously, the tip of her tail weaving through the water behind her.

Rollo laughed and called out encouragement as Vígi drew closer. When she reached the edge of his ship he leaned over and plucked her from the water, not caring that he almost capsized the boat in the process.

Even from where she was standing Sera could hear the way Rollo crooned to Vígi, letting her sopping body settle in his massive lap as she licked at his face happily. Every time her tail swung it sent out an arc of water, drenching the men stationed at the oars, but neither dog nor master noticed or cared.

Sera couldn't help but smile. Even though they'd risked screwing up the time line by warping here to return Vígi to her master, it was worth it to see how happy she made the Viking chieftain. And he deserved to have his dog back after he'd done so much to help the three time travelers.

As soon as that thought crossed her mind, Sera gasped. Of course! The solution was so obvious that she started to laugh hard enough for tears to leak down her cheeks.

When she caught her breath she realized that Dak, Riq, and Bill were all staring at her with concern. She suppressed a few more chuckles and cleared her throat before announcing, "We've been looking at this the wrong way. I figured out how to fix the Break."

They continued to stare at her, eyes wide with expectation.

She turned to Bill. They'd need his expertise to make it work. "How quickly can you get us to the king?"



## So Close, So Far Away

SERA COULDN'T stop beaming. They'd been looking at the problem all wrong. Riq had been right, there was nothing the three of them could do to keep the Vikings from occupying Normandy. So the solution was obvious: They had to pick the *right* Viking to take charge. And Rollo was the perfect candidate.

It was brilliant in its simplicity. And best of all, it involved making peace instead of war.

Even though it had been her idea to approach King Charles the Simple with the idea of granting Rollo the land that would one day become Normandy in exchange for his promise to protect the mouth of the Seine from further Viking attacks, it had been Bill who'd pulled it all off. They'd known there was no way the king would listen to three kids, and Bill knew that the fate of the world rested on his ability to get this deal done.

He'd been hesitant to accept the task at first. He explained he'd always seen his role as Hystorian as being to keep records and support the time travelers, not to take such an active role. But as a native Parisian who had spent decades among the Vikings, he was the perfect ambassador. It had taken the entire boat trip up the river to the king's camp to convince him, but in the end Sera was the one to get him to agree.

After that it had been a long and tense ride. The boats were crowded and Sera spent the entire time anxious about the impending meeting. She knew

her plan was a long shot — why would the king even accept an audience with them, much less agree to their proposal? After all, according to Dak, Charles the Simple ruled over the Franks — he owned the river they were traveling on, the land along the banks, and everything she could see.

At the same time, she saw no other way to fix the Break. They had to secure Normandy and the lineage that would rule it. She trusted Rollo and she trusted Bill to convince the king of what they needed.

Once they arrived at the edge of the king's camp, they spent several tense hours waiting to find out if they could even speak with anyone who might listen to their ideas. They could all just as easily been taken prisoner. Sera tried not to squeal with glee when a dour-looking set of soldiers led their small group to a large, ornate tent with smoke drifting from a peak at the top.

“It's the king's tent,” Dak whispered out of the corner of his mouth as the flaps were pulled aside and the soldier motioned for them to enter.

That was pretty much the point at which Sera's mind went blank. She knew she'd stood before the king, and she remembered being proud of the way Bill's voice didn't tremble even when her hands shook so hard she had to grasp them behind her back.

At first the king balked at the idea of ceding away so much land to a Norseman, but Bill explained that Rollo would swear fealty, making himself a subject of the king and bound by his laws — something Vikings rarely ever did — and promise to guard against future Viking invasions by stopping them from entering the Seine.

The king was tired of Viking invasions, which made it that much easier for Bill to persuade him to sign off on the deal.

They'd thought that convincing Rollo would be another matter entirely but when they approached him with the solution he merely shrugged. “I was getting too old for plundering anyway,” he'd told them. “Besides, now that I've got Vígi back, I figure it's time to give her a better life and settle down.”

While everyone else had started celebrating the new arrangement, Sera found a quiet spot and pulled out the Infinity Ring.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Dak said, holding up his hands and stepping out of reach. “Not so fast! Rollo’s becoming a duke tomorrow and invited us to the ceremony. That’s something I’m *not* going to miss.”

Sera rolled her eyes. “We’re not warping through time just so we can attend a few parties. There’s a Cataclysm we’re supposed to be preventing, if you’ll recall.”

“I don’t see why we can’t do both,” Dak offered, raising his eyebrows and giving her a hopeful smile.

“Are you forgetting that there are Time Wardens after us? They know what we look like, too,” she countered.

“We’ll wear disguises!” Dak suggested. “It’s been a rough few days. Think of this as a morale booster!”

Sera glanced at Riq, who shrugged. “Fine,” she finally said. “We stay for the ceremony and then we go. But Dak’s in charge of finding us all costumes.”

Dak started dancing around the clearing in celebration — it wasn’t a pretty sight.



Dak couldn’t stop hopping from foot to foot. He hadn’t been this excited since he’d unearthed that cache of rare coins from a hidden drawer in a famous antique desk (it wasn’t his fault the museum had such poor security). “Can you believe we’re actually here for this?” he whispered to Sera for the twenty millionth time.

She glared at him from under a large drooping hat and a tangle of horsehair meant to look like a wig. Her clothes were bulky and dirty, giving her a sloppy, misshapen appearance that wasn’t helped by the smell. She didn’t look pleased, but Dak figured that the worse they smelled, the less likely people would spend enough time around them to realize who they were under the disguises.

He gave her an innocent look in return. She’d put him in charge of procuring disguises; she should have known what she was getting herself into.

Even her discomfort couldn't dull the excitement thrumming through him. It was just all so . . . real! The king's men had been working all day to craft a throne and a dais for the ceremony to take place on. A crowd had started gathering early but Dak had dragged Sera and Riq to the location just beyond the river before the sun rose.

He wasn't going to miss a minute of this!

The procession began with the blaring of horns and the arrival of important guests from nearby villages and towns. Rollo's men were peppered through the crowd, an odd mix of those who, not too long ago, had been fighting against one another tooth and nail.

Speeches were made, descriptions of land and boundaries rattled off, and as the ceremony proceeded, something began to seem amiss to Dak. There were moments when he felt like someone was staring at him but when he glanced through the crowd to find out who it was, there was no one looking in his direction.

The uncomfortable sensation grew as the long day dragged and it began to feel like a weight on his shoulders. He found his mind wandering, his focus diverted from the details of what was going on around him.

On the stage a minstrel was singing a ballad, but Dak's attention was drawn to a group of men gathering on the far edge of the crowd near a copse of trees. They were growing rowdy and something about it piqued Dak's interest.

"Be right back," he murmured to Sera, and before she could say anything to stop him, he'd slipped through the throng and disappeared. He had to fight against the surging crowd, everyone pressing forward for a view of the dais as speculation that the king's arrival was imminent drifted from mouth to mouth.

Dak kept his gaze focused on the crowd growing around the disturbance, forcing his way nearer. As he approached the commotion his heart started to pound faster, his stomach twisting with an anticipation he didn't understand.

The mob had their hands raised, shouting out curses. Dak asked the closest Frank what was going on. "The devil's spawn, that's what they are," the man hissed before turning and shouting that they should burn the pair.

He heard a woman cry out, “No!” and then someone else, a man, shout, “Leave her alone. Get back!”

His blood froze. He knew those voices.

“Mom! Dad!” he yelled, elbowing people out of the way as he battled his way forward. It was slow going, the crowd packed so tight that he had to resort to crawling between legs at times, not caring when someone’s heel crunched his fingers.

All around him people surged, their faces twisted with rage. Dak had forgotten how superstitious most people were during this time period. Science as he knew it didn’t exist yet — anything unexplainable was chalked up to magic.

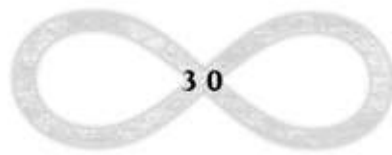
As he drew closer he caught glimpses of his parents. They both brandished what looked like rifles from the American Revolutionary War. And rifles wouldn’t be invented until the nineteenth century. No wonder the crowd was going nuts!

“Hold on!” he shouted, shoving two people out of the way. “I’m coming!”

Just as he reached the center of the circle, his parents flickered like a TV channel losing reception. “Wait!” Dak cried out.

His mother stretched out her hand and Dak reached for it. When he closed his fingers it was around nothing but air.

Dak’s parents had been pulled out of time. They were gone.



## Left Hanging

ONCE AGAIN Dak was missing. “Where is he?” Sera hissed at Riq. She felt like she should have this question printed up on a placard so she could just wave it around whenever necessary.

Riq scanned the crowd halfheartedly before turning his attention back to the dais where a man read the terms of the Treaty of Sainte-Clair-sur-Epte. Rollo and the king had finally taken their positions. “I’m sure he just went off to find a better view.”

“But I don’t see him.” She pressed her hand against the Infinity Ring tucked under her bulky cloak. Throughout the day she’d caught glimpses of Gorm wandering through the crowd, and he wasn’t alone this time. It was making her anxious.

“The ceremony’s started and it’s not like him to miss it. Maybe I should go look for him.” She’d just started pushing her way through the crowd when she heard a rumble of an argument followed by a collective gasp from those around her.

She spun toward Riq. “What happened?”

He looked stunned, which was unusual for him. “The bishop said that Rollo should kiss the king’s foot as a demonstration of his fealty and a thanks for the gift of the land.” He turned to face Sera. “Rollo said he’d never bend



his knee to anyone or kiss anyone's foot. If he refuses, the ceremony will end without him being appointed the Duke of Normandy.”

Sera started feeling slightly panicked. They were so close to fixing this Break — they couldn't let it all fall apart *now*.

“We can still fix this, right?” Riq said.

Sera nodded, slowly. “I think so, if we hurry. But figuring out what it would take —” Riq was already on his feet and pushing through the crowd before Sera could finish the thought.

She stood, trying to follow, but the gaps Riq created in the crush of people closed too fast, and she was brought up short again and again. From her left she heard someone shout and a man with an SQ insignia stitched in his collar began to force his way forward. He pointed directly at her and called for backup.

They were so busted. Again.

Sera swallowed her alarm and concentrated on her efforts at catching Riq. She made it to the front of the crowd, but was too late. He'd already leapt up the steps to the dais and was beyond her reach.

“Riq,” she hissed but he couldn't hear and she didn't dare risk drawing more attention to herself. The Infinity Ring was already preprogrammed for Washington, DC. All she had to do was find Dak and grab Riq, and they could get out of here before being nabbed by the SQ.

*Totally easy*, she thought, rolling her eyes.

Riq didn't even appear to hesitate as he strode across the dais to where Rollo towered over the king, both of them gesturing heatedly. Sera caught snippets of the argument: The king's bishops demanded Rollo show fealty; Rollo flat-out refused to humiliate himself by kissing another man's muddy boot.

When he spoke, Riq's voice rang clearly over the crowd, silencing everyone. “We can agree that the king wishes for Rollo to occupy around the city of Rouen stretching to the sea, including the mouth of the Seine River, correct?”

Shouts of agreement came from the Vikings in the crowd.

“And we can also agree that in exchange for such generosity, Rollo shall give fealty to the king and defend Francia’s borders, can we not?”

This time the Franks in the audience cheered their approval.

Riq knew what he was doing. This crowd was not going to be happy if the treaty fell through — and now both Rollo and King Charles knew it.

“In fact,” Riq continued, turning to the two leaders, “a treaty to such effect has already been agreed to, correct?”

After a slight hesitation, both men nodded.

“What’s he doing?” someone muttered in a familiar voice and Sera scoured the crowd until she found Dak standing on the other side of the aisle leading to the platform.

They’d strung chains from posts to keep the crowds at bay and there was no way Sera could cross to Dak without drawing a whole lot of unwanted attention.

“Where have you been?” she demanded loud enough that a few surrounding men grumbled for her to be quiet. She noticed that Dak’s eyes seemed a bit wild, his body almost vibrating with tension.

She had no idea what would cause him to be so agitated, and she was afraid to find out. Over his shoulder, deeper in the sea of people, Sera saw a pair of SQ agents pushing their way toward the dais. She pointed them out to Dak and he ducked, slipping through a few people to better hide himself. Sera did the same.

Whatever Riq was planning, he’d better hurry up or they’d all be in big trouble.

Riq continued with his speech. “All that remain are the formalities, and I think that both parties can agree to assign such duties to those trusted men among their ranks, right?”

If the king was unhappy with the idea, he didn’t show it. Once Rollo gave his assent the king followed suit.

With the flourish of someone who’d obviously spent a lot of time on a stage learning how to woo a crowd, Riq turned to Rollo. “May I have the great honor of representing you for such an honorable act?”

Rollo frowned and shrugged. Riq turned back to the king. “And will you accept my substitution on this fine Viking chieftain’s behalf?”

The king looked toward his men, clearly lost as to what was going on. Sera had to press her hands to her mouth to keep from giggling. Even though it was clear to her that Riq was overdoing this, the crowd was eating it up.

Eventually the king waved his hand ambiguously. If he’d been expecting Riq to kneel and lower his head to the ground, he was wrong. Riq stepped toward him and took the king’s muddy boot firmly in his hand. He then raised it to his mouth without bending over and, with loud exaggeration, kissed it.

Clearly the king was not flexible enough to have his leg lifted so high, and he tumbled backward and off the dais.

Riq turned and beamed. “The king’s foot has been kissed and Rollo’s fealty given.”

The crowd gasped. There was silence. And then someone snorted. Somewhere else there was a stifled giggle, a cough, and before long the entire crowd was roaring with laughter.

The king’s attendants helped him to his feet, and Sera saw a flurry of emotions cross his face — bewilderment and frustration at first, but he softened at seeing the amusement of the crowd. The king smiled, apparently deciding that he needed to look like he was in on the joke.

Sera was so caught up in the moment that she wasn’t prepared for the hand that clamped on her shoulder and the voice shouting, “Hey, you!”

Sera jumped and screamed, the sound lost in the noise from the crowd. The SQ agent shifted his hand from her squirming shoulder to a long shank of her fake hair. “You’re not getting away again,” he threatened.

She grinned, stepping sideways and out from under the horsehair wig. “That’s what you think!”

Without a second thought, she ducked under the chain blocking the aisle and raced toward Dak, grabbing him and pulling him to where Riq stood on the stage, surrounded by a band of cheerful Vikings.

“The SQ is onto us,” she yelled to him over the noise of the crowd. “We have to get out of here!”

Rollo must have seen the urgency on her face and known what it meant, because once the two of them had climbed the stairs and joined Riq, he and his men closed rank around them, facing outward with their weapons drawn.

“Yo, Riq,” Dak said, holding out his fist for the older boy to bump it. “That was pretty awesome what you did with the king!”

Riq grinned, obviously pleased by the compliment, and returned the gesture.

“My time-traveling friends, you’re leaving so soon?” Rollo asked. Beside him, Vígi whined, her forehead furrowed.

Dak scratched at her ears. “I’m afraid so,” he told the new Duke of Normandy. “Though this time I think we’ll leave this lady at home.”

Rollo clamped his hand on Dak’s shoulder. “You’re a strong warrior, smart and true. Thank you for the gift you’ve given me. I will keep the SQ — whether Frank or Viking — out of Normandy for all time. And I promise to turn away from pillaging and do well by my station as duke. Mostly.”

Dak’s face blazed bright red at the compliment, but Sera knew he was loving every minute of it. She pulled the Infinity Ring out and started double-checking that everything was set correctly. The last thing she wanted to do was let a last-minute miscalculation send them zooming too far ahead in the future or drop them into the middle of another war zone.

Beside her, someone cleared his throat and she looked up to find Bill. “So that’s it, then?”

Sera hesitated and then nodded.

He cleared his throat. “I ran out of time, back in Paris, before I could give you this. I’d meant to, then, and I’ve held on to it . . . just in case.”

He pulled a length of fine chain over his head and held it out to her. A gold charm dangled from the end and she reached out to cup it. It was a tiny infinity symbol, delicate and smoothly polished. “My ancestors were goldsmiths and they passed down the skills.”

Sera felt her throat tighten. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“I wanted to thank *you*, actually,” he said.

That took Sera by surprise. “For what?”

“For being brave,” he explained. “I’d have never done anything big in my life, taken any risks, if I hadn’t learned that from you.”

Sera sputtered, “I’m not really that brave and I hate risks.”

In response, Bill smiled. “Maybe you don’t see it yet, but I do.”

Just then Riq stepped forward and linked his arm with hers. “Our work here is done,” Riq announced. “On to 1814!”

“One War of 1812, coming up!” Dak placed his hand on her shoulder after kneeling to allow Vígi to give him one last slobbery kiss.

Sera took a final look around her and smiled at Bill as she pushed the button to send them swirling through time. The Infinity Ring began to vibrate, the scene around her blurring. Her body felt small and impossibly big at the same time. “One more thing,” Dak whispered just as everything began to shatter apart. “I saw my parents. They were here and then they warped out in front of my eyes. But not before they left me *this*.”

The last thing Sera saw as medieval France disappeared was Dak holding out a large iron key.

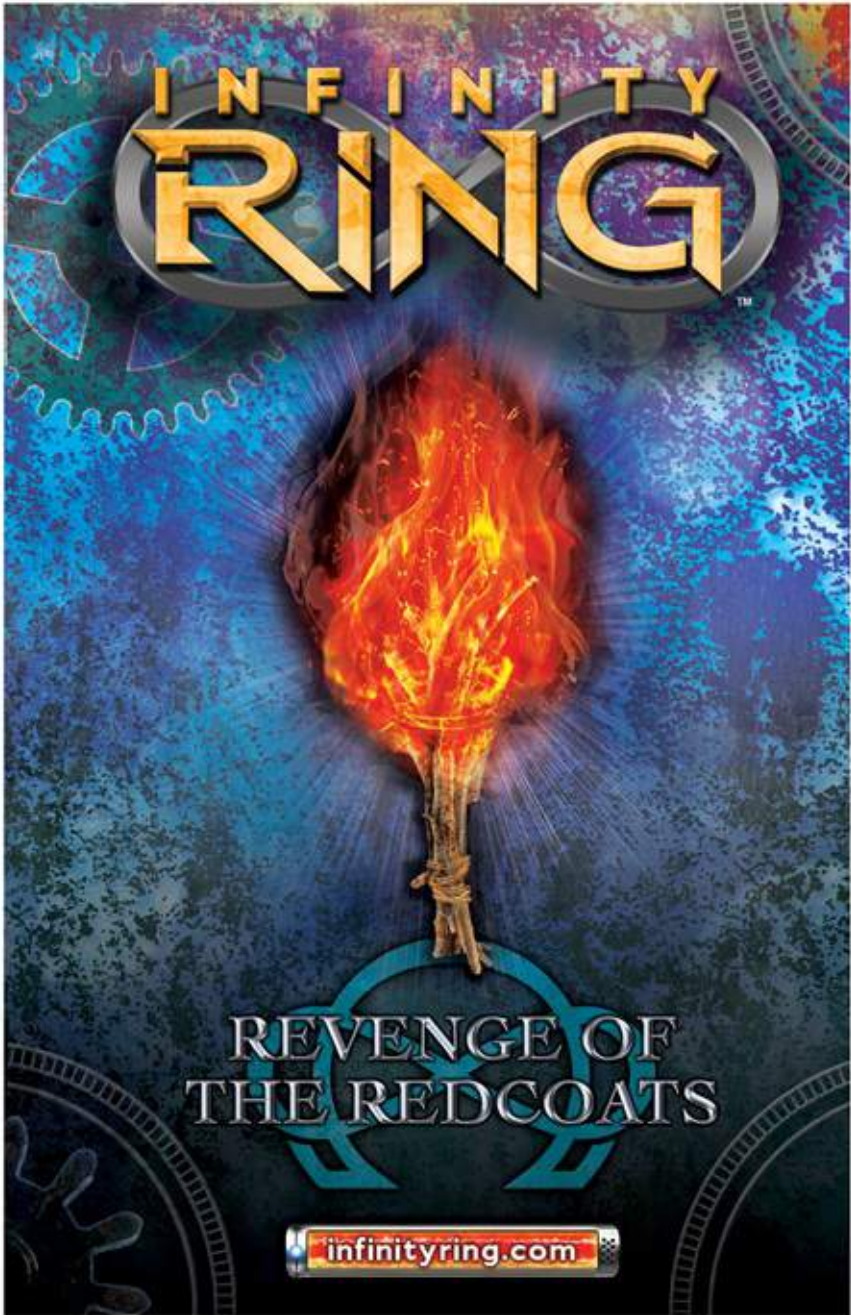


Turn the page for your Hystorian's Guide to the War of 1812.

The United States is under attack. Join the fight for freedom now in the action-packed Infinity Ring game. This is your strategy guide for staying alive.

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REVENGE OF  
THE REDCOATS

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## MEMO FROM ARIN

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YOU must make sure that the SQ never lays hands on the First Lady!

Washington, DC, is under attack. In 1814, the British army burned the city to the ground. It was a very dark day for the newly formed United States. Worst of all, during the invasion, First Lady Dolley Madison refused to leave the President's House, and a secret squad of SQ Redcoats kidnapped her. They brought her to London and held her hostage. As a result, the U.S. had to surrender. It was a humiliating defeat, and one that gave the SQ a permanent hold on the American government.

Get Dolley Madison safely out of the city!

— Arin



Watch out for these guys! Not only were they armed and dangerous, but many members of the SQ could be found lurking in their ranks.

KNOW YOUR ...

## REDCOAT

### FUN FACT!

As the Redcoats advanced on Washington, they used the "Moore Quickstep"—three steps at a run, then three steps at a walk. Plus, each man had about thirty pounds of supplies in his knapsack. In the blazing heat, that made for a tough trip.

**MOST NOTEWORTHY FEATURE:**  
Their red coats, of course!

**WEAPON OF CHOICE:**  
A rifle with a sword called a bayonet mounted on it. Stay far away from those.



## Gilbert Stuart's Portrait of **GEORGE WASHINGTON**



Surprised that the president had time to pose for portraits? Well, Washington posed for the portrait of his head, but he wouldn't have stayed for the painter to paint the body. A model would have taken that boring job.

Wearing a plain black suit to show he's a democratic president—not a royal monarch.

Holding a sword, since he had been a general for many years before he became president.

To: Agent Law 14

The army is moving on Washington and will burn the city to the ground to demonstrate our power. But first, I need you to go on an advance mission. There is a Hystorian spy in the city who knows our plans. If we do not get to him in time, he could ruin everything. You must silence him.



Major General Robert Ross



To:    D a k    a n d    S e r a  
12      3 4 5    6 7 8    9 10 11 12

W-10-'-v-10 l-10-f-1 y-2-u 9-2-m-10-1-h-i-7-9  
7-10-12-11 1-h-10 2-c-1-4-g-2-7 H-2-u-9-10.  
3-2-7-'-1 l-10-1 i-1 f-4-l-l i-7-1-2 1-h-10  
W-11-2-7-g h-4-7-8-9.  
W-10 l-2-v-10 y-2-u.

Select Language



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## ★ The WAR of ★

# 1812



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### Time line

**March 4, 1809**

James Madison inaugurated as president of the United States.

**June 18, 1812**

The U.S. declares war on Great Britain.

**August 24, 1814**

**4 P.M.**

The Battle of Bladensburg in Maryland ends in defeat for the Americans.

**8 P.M.**

From there, the British ride into Washington.

**10 P.M.**

A British SQ operative kidnaps First Lady Dolley Madison and steals the famous portrait of George Washington from the President's House.

**11 P.M.**

With Dolley locked in a closet, the troops dig in to the meal she'd planned on serving at a dinner party.

**11:30 P.M.**

The British begin to torch the city.

**5:00 A.M.**

A thunderstorm puts out the fire, but most public buildings are in ashes. The President's House is destroyed.

**September 13, 1814**

The start of the Battle of Fort McHenry, which inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Torn, Tattered Banner."

**September 25, 1814**

Morale low, Congress votes to move the U.S. capitol away from Washington, DC, rather than rebuilding the city. It is relocated to Philadelphia, where it has remained ever since.

**October 15, 1814**

Dolley Madison, a hostage of the SQ, is paraded around London.

**January 1, 1815**

The United States surrenders in order to get Dolley back. The war is over.





Check out an  
ACTUAL FLAG  
from the time-  
burned by  
the British!



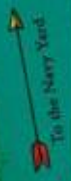


THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE, 1814  
(AKA THE WHITE HOUSE)



**LEGEND**

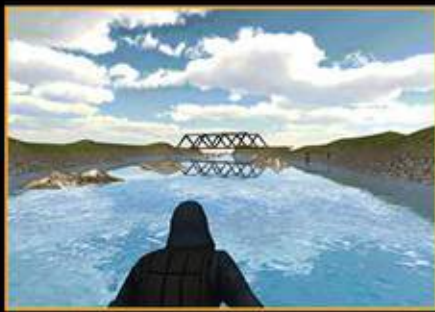
- President's House
- Blacksmith's Shop
- Suspicious Activity
- Timebox





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Includes an all-new, top secret Hystorian's Guide — which unlocks the next episode of the Infinity Ring game.

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Below is a sneak peek from Infinity Ring Book 3: *The Trap Door* by Lisa McMann.



THE FLOOR moved up a few inches, and then a few inches more. “Run!” Dak whispered. He quickly took his own advice, and it didn’t take Sera or Riq any time at all to follow him out the door. They ran wildly for a minute or two, Sera hobbling through the sticks and mud on one bare foot, until they were a good distance away and hidden in a copse of evergreens.

“Why are we running?” Riq asked Dak between breaths.

“Dude, the floor moved. There was something down there!”

“Yeah, well, all we had to do was stand on it if we didn’t want the person to come out.”

“How do you know it was a person?” Dak asked.

“Right,” Sera said. “It could have been a monster.” She smirked.

“Hey, you never know. The way our luck has gone, it could have been Sasquatch,” Riq said.

Dak shook his head and sighed, annoyed. “You obviously know nothing about Sasquatch. He wasn’t sighted anywhere around here in 1850. Strictly northwest in the early years — he didn’t even have a name back then.”

“*Anywaaay*,” Sera prompted. “This is serious — what if they heard us? Riq, you totally said we were time travelers!”

Riq opened his mouth as if to protest, but then he closed it again. “I did?” he asked weakly.

“Riq!” Dak said. “You blew it.”

“Oh, please. I did not,” Riq scoffed. He glanced over his shoulder nervously. “But if either of you has an idea of where to go next, I’m all ears.”

Dak began muttering. “Eighteen-fifty. Maryland. A bowl something ist.” He scratched his head, and then mumbled, “There was a lantern by that shed. . .”

After a second, he looked up. A sopping brown oak leaf flew through the wind and stuck to his cheek. “Duh,” he said. “Abolitionist. Come on, before we get struck by lightning.” He started walking, pulling the leaf from his cheek. Riq followed him.

Sera hesitated. “Guys,” she called. “I don’t understand. Where are we going? We didn’t solve the whole clue.” She ducked as a branch came flying through the wind at her.

“Because the answer is obvious. We’re supposed to join the abolitionists,” Dak said. “Seems likely that our Hystorian would be against slavery, right? So we need to find one to figure out how to help them.” He was getting cranky, slogging through the wet underbrush.

Sera followed along behind the boys, limping. “So where do we find an abolitionist in a hurricane?” she asked.

Dak frowned. “Technically, with a temperature this low, it’s not a —”

“Well, der,” Sera said, “I *know* that. It’s a nor’easter, but I didn’t feel like explaining —”

Riq looked up to the sky as if pleading for help, shook his head, and started trudging toward the nearest house.

Sera and Dak looked at each other and then turned to follow Riq.

“We look out of place, don’t forget,” Sera said, catching up to the older boy. “People might get suspicious.”

He looked down at his outfit. “I’m quite aware. But we can’t do anything in the way of Cataclysm prevention if we have to amputate your foot.”

“Aw,” Sera said. “You care about my foot.” She smiled.

Riq’s face was stern. “I care about the Hystorian quest.”

That was enough to silence everyone for the remainder of the walk.

The first house they came to was dark. The curtains were drawn, and there was nothing in the windows or on the porch. Dak shook his head. “This one doesn’t seem right.” They continued to the next one, which also didn’t look right to Dak.

“What are you looking for?” Riq asked.

“I’ll let you know when I find it,” Dak said.

Sera just bent her head into the wind and trudged after them.

Several minutes later, they approached the third house, the wind and rain slapping their faces raw.

Noticing a lit lantern in the window, Dak cautiously climbed the first porch step. “This might be it. They used lanterns as a signal.” He glanced out over the cornfield, identified the shed in the distance, and wondered if the field and that shed belonged to this homeowner. If so, the trap door made a bit more sense.

Riq stopped short of the steps and frowned. *Not that there’s anything unusual about Riq frowning*, thought Dak.

Sera looked at the older boy. “Do you think it’s safe?” she asked.

But Riq didn’t respond. Instead he groaned, pitched forward, grabbed the porch railing, and closed his eyes.

Sera reached out and held his arm. It took Dak a moment to figure out what was happening — Riq was having a Remnant.

“Is it a bad one?” Sera whispered.

There was no time to answer.

The door opened a crack, and then a bit more, and a woman in a black, warm-looking woolen dress and a bonnet on her head peered out. “Come in,” she said, and then she hesitated, taking in their strange appearances. But after a moment she smiled and repeated herself, more urgently this time. “*Ooh*, interesting. Come in, come in.” She waved them toward her as if to hurry them, and they didn’t hesitate.

Inside, a fire crackled in the fireplace. Riq, Sera, and Dak stood in the entryway, shivering and dripping all over the floor, but the woman didn’t seem to mind. She handed them each a towel so they could dry off.

“Well now,” she said, looking at Sera. “Your clothes are mighty unusual.”

Sera looked her in the eye. “We were at a party at the, um . . .”

“Plantation up the road,” Dak continued. “It was a post-Revolutionary theme. On the way home, one of our horses, uh” — he glanced downward and saw Sera’s bare foot — “lost a shoe, and we’ve walked quite a long way in the storm, looking for a place to stay the night.”

Sera looked like she wanted to kick Dak.

Riq said nothing.

The woman smiled broadly. “There’s no need to invent stories here. I’m Hester Beeson and I’m a Friend. I imagine you were looking for me.” She looked at Dak and Sera when she spoke, but tilted her head toward Riq.

Dak lifted his shoulders just slightly in a shrug, and then nodded his head once.

“Right,” Dak said. “Wow, so you’re a . . .” He hesitated on purpose.

“Oh yes, I’m on your side,” she said with a grin. “It’s a joy to be of service to you.” Dak’s face lit up. Hystorian? *Bingo!*

Mrs. Beeson wasted no time. “Well, come along, then. We’ve got a safe room here — you just never know who might be about on a night like this. . . .” She led them through the house.

Dak flashed Riq a puzzled look, but Riq stared straight ahead, stone-faced.

“Can I,” she said, turning back toward them with her hands outstretched, “take anything for you? Put it in the safe?”

Sera raised an eyebrow. “N-no, thank you. We prefer to hold on to everything.”

“All right, then.” The woman didn’t seem to notice Riq’s odd expression, but Dak did. And he didn’t know quite what to make of it.

The woman pulled aside a plain wooden chair and a rug to reveal a square door in the floor. She turned the inset lock and pulled it open, and then stood aside and pointed proudly at the opening. “Like magic,” she said with a grin. “You two and your slave will be comfortable down here.”

Dak and Sera stared at each other, jaws dropped. Then Dak looked at Riq, who was bristling.

“Mrs. Beeson,” Sera began, her cheeks blazing, “Riq is *not* our —”

A swift kick to her shin shut her up just in time.

“I’m glad you made it safely.” Mrs. Beeson began to hum as the three climbed down a ladder into a small, cool cellar, lit by lanterns. “You’ll find

dry clothes to change into, and some water and soap for those cuts on your foot, miss. I'll bring some food down in a bit."

"Okay . . . thank you," Sera said, but her voice was unsure. She shot questioning glances at Dak and Riq, and they returned them. Sera leaned toward them and whispered, "She's a weird one. Do you really think she's the local Hystorian?"

Dak nodded. But something sure seemed off.

"Excuse me," he called up the ladder. "You know who Aristotle is, right?"

"No, dear," Mrs. Beeson answered. "I've never met anyone by that name."

A moment later the door overhead closed.

And then the lock clicked.

They heard the chair scraping the floor above to cover it.

The three incredibly smart, self-proclaimed geniuses had just willingly gotten themselves locked in a drafty cellar. All three turned to one another as Dak said, "Wait. What just happened?"





**Carrie Ryan** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Forest of Hands and Teeth* trilogy as well as the editor of the anthology *Foretold: 14 Stories of Prophecy and Prediction*. A former litigator, she now writes full time from her home in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she lives with her writer-lawyer husband, two fat cats, and one rather large rescue mutt. Learn more at her website, [www.carrieryan.com](http://www.carrieryan.com).



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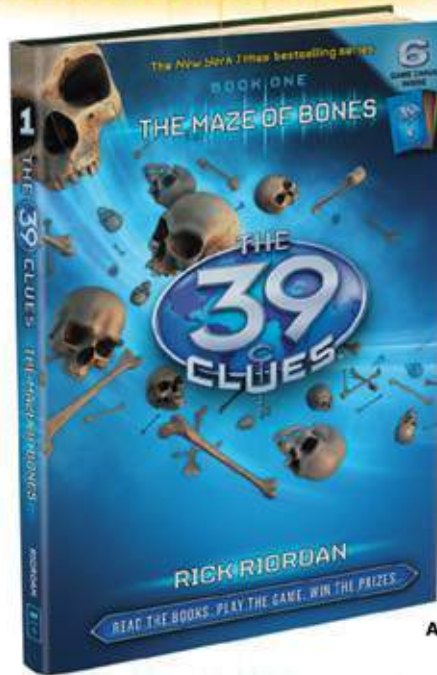
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

e-ISBN 978-0-545-47395-8

Cover illustration by Sammy Yuen  
Cover design by Sammy Yuen and Keirsten Geise

First edition, November 2012

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012  
Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1  
Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141  
Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

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The Trap Door

Lisa McMann

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For Casey  
– L.M.







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Conductor, Healer, Soldier, Spy.

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## Amber Waves of . . . Corn?

“FOR THE love of Madison. Er . . . mincemeat, I mean,” Sera said, looking down at her fashionable yet extremely wimpy slipper shoes, which until recently had been red. “My toes are freezing.” She glanced over her shoulder to make sure Riq and Dak were there with her, too, and hopefully nobody else — after their adventures in Viking-land, when a too-enormous-to-be-genetically-possible hound named Vígi had hitched a ride, one could never be too sure.

All of their shoes were covered in mud. It was raining — no, it was *pouring*, and windy, too, and they were standing in a weather-beaten cornfield. More like a huskfield, actually. The corn had obviously been picked months ago and only the tall graying stalks remained. In one direction Sera could see a small town and a sizeable river with the tips of sailing masts bobbing along it, and in another direction a few enormous plantation houses and some smaller ones, with lots of farmland in between.

Sera put the Infinity Ring back into the satchel on her belt. They’d just used it to warp away from Washington, DC, in 1814, where they’d fixed a Break at the White House, of all places, and hung out with the First Lady, Dolley Madison, of all people. And her slaves.

That part had been a little weird.

“Where’s the SQuare?” she asked. She knew they had arrived somewhere in Maryland in the year 1850, but to learn *why* they were there, she needed to check the tablet computer given to them by the Hystorians. “And if you say it’s in your pants one more time, Dak, I’m

going to get mad. Just warning you.” Dak was Sera’s best friend, but she had her limits. Hanging around with two smelly boys was getting less and less enjoyable as the days passed, that was for sure. If only they’d had time for a bath in the White House . . . now *that* would have been a story to bring home.

Home. She closed her eyes as a Remnant — like an almost-memory of something that should have been — washed over her. She wasn’t sure if it was just a coincidence that warping through time seemed to make her Remnants stronger, or if these conditions met the Theory of Nonlocality, but it certainly seemed like they were related. And since Riq’s Remnants were getting worse, too — even though he wouldn’t talk about them — Sera was pretty sure the two experiences had to be connected somehow. Maybe the Remnants had to get worse before they could get better.

“The SQuare? It’s in my pants,” Dak said, which set him off laughing and slapping his thigh.

Riq, who was a few years older, rolled his eyes. “Knock it off. And be quiet. We don’t know if anybody’s around yet.” He sighed. “I’m getting a little tired of babysitting you two. Geez.”

“Did you say ‘cheese’?” Dak roared with laughter again. He turned to Sera. “Did he just say ‘cheese’?”

It had been a long, exhausting few days.

Sera was used to Dak’s obnoxious jokes, but Riq’s comment about babysitting was just unfair. Especially after she and Riq had bonded in medieval France, when Dak had been missing in action. *She* hadn’t been the immature one. *She* hadn’t gotten captured by Vikings or lost the SQuare or eaten the king of France’s cheese or . . . or anything like that. She turned her head away, folded her arms, and hugged herself against the cold and rain as the wind whipped her sopping dress around her padded, puffy legs. She looked like a rejected yard-sale rag doll, tossed from a car window into a mud puddle.

Riq scowled. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “I’m just . . . I’m tired. We all are. Come on, let’s get out of this blasted hurricane and figure out what we’re here to do.”

Sera pushed past him, but not very hard since he’d said he was sorry, and then intentionally bumped into Dak extra hard for being so annoying. She tried to stomp down the row but one of her slippers sucked right off her foot and disappeared into the mud. “Jiminy nutcracker,” she muttered. She shook her head at the spot where the useless slipper had been and kept walking, one foot bare, cold mud squelching between her toes. She’d

have taken her white elbow-length gloves off, too, if they weren't the only things keeping her from losing her fingers to frostbite.

When they reached the end of the rows of corn, Sera saw an old shed and made a beeline for it. Head down and wishing she'd at least left the White House with a parasol, she barreled forward with one goal in mind: finding shelter inside the shed.

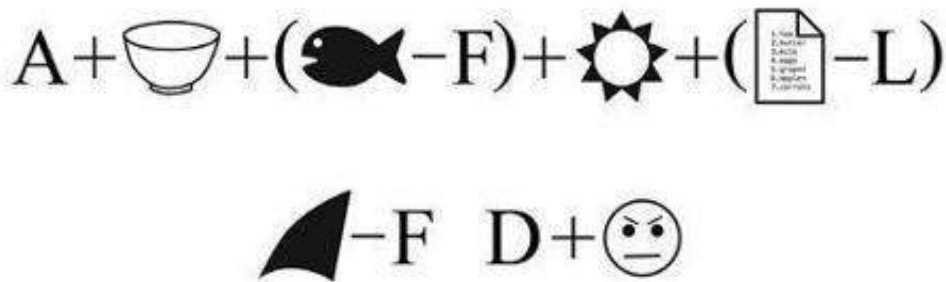
Except for the howling wind, it was quiet. There seemed to be no one around at all. Just a shed with a door banging open, and a lantern swinging wildly on a post outside.

Sera stumbled inside, her feet numb. Dak and Riq followed her. As Sera's eyes adjusted, she saw Dak was already squinting at the SQuare.

"Well?" she prompted. "What's the Break?"

"Not sure yet. We have to solve another puzzle," Dak said. "Pictures this time." He handed the SQuare to Riq.

As Riq studied the images, Sera peered around his shoulder to get a look.



Sera looked at the first image and began talking it through to herself. "A bowl . . . fish . . . something about sunshine food?" Her teeth chattered.

Riq flashed her a look of mild annoyance. "Do you have to do that right next to my ear? My auto-translator is going crazy trying to decipher your tooth language."

Sera clamped her teeth together and stepped back. "Sorry."

The older boy's features softened. "It's all right." He held the SQuare so that both Sera and Dak could see. "Come on. We're all on the same team. Time travelers together."

"Some of us are better team players than others," Dak grumbled.

Sera sighed and looked away, tapping her foot. She didn't want to hear any more snide comments from either of the boys. She glanced around the shed, her eyes straining in the dim light. She wondered if there was anyplace to sit down without getting completely filthy.



It was a small shed. Even in the dark, she could make out the whole space. Which is why she was surprised to suddenly see movement.

Sera froze for a second, and then took a step back so she could ease the door open, letting in a bit more light. “Quiet!” she whispered. “Did you guys see that?” She pointed to the back corner of the little shed, where the floor was moving. It was a trap door, and it was opening. “We’re not alone.”



## Some Friend

THE FLOOR moved up a few inches, and then a few inches more. “Run!” Dak whispered. He quickly took his own advice, and it didn’t take Sera or Riq any time at all to follow him out the door. They ran wildly for a minute or two, Sera hobbling through the sticks and mud on one bare foot, until they were a good distance away and hidden in a copse of evergreens.

“Why are we running?” Riq asked Dak between breaths.

“Dude, the floor moved. There was something down there!”

“Yeah, well, all we had to do was stand on it if we didn’t want the person to come out.”

“How do you know it was a person?” Dak asked.

“Right,” Sera said. “It could have been a monster.” She smirked.

“Hey, you never know. The way our luck has gone, it could have been Sasquatch,” Riq said.

Dak shook his head and sighed, annoyed. “You obviously know nothing about Sasquatch. He wasn’t sighted anywhere around here in 1850. Strictly northwest in the early years — he didn’t even have a name back then.”

“*Anywaaay*,” Sera prompted. “This is serious — what if they heard us? Riq, you totally said we were time travelers!”

Riq opened his mouth as if to protest, but then he closed it again. “I did?” he asked weakly.

“Riq!” Dak said. “You blew it.”

“Oh, please. I did not,” Riq scoffed. He glanced over his shoulder nervously. “But if either of you has an idea of where to go next, I’m all ears.”

Dak began muttering. “Eighteen-fifty. Maryland. A bowl something ist.” He scratched his head, and then mumbled, “There was a lantern by that shed. . . .”

After a second, he looked up. A sopping brown oak leaf flew through the wind and stuck to his cheek. “Duh,” he said. “Abolitionist. Come on, before we get struck by lightning.” He started walking, pulling the leaf from his cheek. Riq followed him.

Sera hesitated. “Guys,” she called. “I don’t understand. Where are we going? We didn’t solve the whole clue.” She ducked as a branch came flying through the wind at her.

“Because the answer is obvious. We’re supposed to join the abolitionists,” Dak said. “Seems likely that our Hystorian would be against slavery, right? So we need to find one to figure out how to help them.” He was getting cranky, slogging through the wet underbrush.

Sera followed along behind the boys, limping. “So where do we find an abolitionist in a hurricane?” she asked.

Dak frowned. “Technically, with a temperature this low, it’s not a —”

“Well, der,” Sera said, “I *know* that. It’s a nor’easter, but I didn’t feel like explaining —”

Riq looked up to the sky as if pleading for help, shook his head, and started trudging toward the nearest house.

Sera and Dak looked at each other and then turned to follow Riq.

“We look out of place, don’t forget,” Sera said, catching up to the older boy. “People might get suspicious.”

He looked down at his outfit. “I’m quite aware. But we can’t do anything in the way of Cataclysm prevention if we have to amputate your foot.”

“Aw,” Sera said. “You care about my foot.” She smiled.

Riq’s face was stern. “I care about the Hystorian quest.”

That was enough to silence everyone for the remainder of the walk.

The first house they came to was dark. The curtains were drawn, and there was nothing in the windows or on the porch. Dak shook his head. “This one doesn’t seem right.” They continued to the next one, which also didn’t look right to Dak.

“What are you looking for?” Riq asked.

“I’ll let you know when I find it,” Dak said.

Sera just bent her head into the wind and trudged after them.

Several minutes later, they approached the third house, the wind and rain slapping their faces raw.

Noticing a lit lantern in the window, Dak cautiously climbed the first porch step. “This might be it. They used lanterns as a signal.” He glanced out over the cornfield, identified the shed in the distance, and wondered if the field and that shed belonged to this homeowner. If so, the trap door made a bit more sense.

Riq stopped short of the steps and frowned. *Not that there’s anything unusual about Riq frowning*, thought Dak.

Sera looked at the older boy. “Do you think it’s safe?” she asked.

But Riq didn’t respond. Instead he groaned, pitched forward, grabbed the porch railing, and closed his eyes.

Sera reached out and held his arm. It took Dak a moment to figure out what was happening — Riq was having a Remnant.

“Is it a bad one?” Sera whispered.

There was no time to answer.

The door opened a crack, and then a bit more, and a woman in a black, warm-looking woolen dress and a bonnet on her head peered out. “Come in,” she said, and then she hesitated, taking in their strange appearances. But after a moment she smiled and repeated herself, more urgently this time. “*Ooh*, interesting. Come in, come in.” She waved them toward her as if to hurry them, and they didn’t hesitate.

Inside, a fire crackled in the fireplace. Riq, Sera, and Dak stood in the entryway, shivering and dripping all over the floor, but the woman didn’t seem to mind. She handed them each a towel so they could dry off.

“Well now,” she said, looking at Sera. “Your clothes are mighty unusual.”

Sera looked her in the eye. “We were at a party at the, um . . .”

“Plantation up the road,” Dak continued. “It was a post-Revolutionary theme. On the way home, one of our horses, uh” — he glanced downward and saw Sera’s bare foot — “lost a shoe, and we’ve walked quite a long way in the storm, looking for a place to stay the night.”

Sera looked like she wanted to kick Dak.

Riq said nothing.

The woman smiled broadly. “There’s no need to invent stories here. I’m Hester Beeson and I’m a Friend. I imagine you were looking for me.”

She looked at Dak and Sera when she spoke, but tilted her head toward Riq.

Dak lifted his shoulders just slightly in a shrug, and then nodded his head once.

“Right,” Dak said. “Wow, so you’re a . . .” He hesitated on purpose.

“Oh yes, I’m on your side,” she said with a grin. “It’s a joy to be of service to you.” Dak’s face lit up. *Hystorian? Bingo!*

Mrs. Beeson wasted no time. “Well, come along, then. We’ve got a safe room here — you just never know who might be about on a night like this. . . .” She led them through the house.

Dak flashed Riq a puzzled look, but Riq stared straight ahead, stone-faced.

“Can I,” she said, turning back toward them with her hands outstretched, “take anything for you? Put it in the safe?”

Sera raised an eyebrow. “N-no, thank you. We prefer to hold on to everything.”

“All right, then.” The woman didn’t seem to notice Riq’s odd expression, but Dak did. And he didn’t know quite what to make of it.

The woman pulled aside a plain wooden chair and a rug to reveal a square door in the floor. She turned the inset lock and pulled it open, and then stood aside and pointed proudly at the opening. “Like magic,” she said with a grin. “You two and your slave will be comfortable down here.”

Dak and Sera stared at each other, jaws dropped. Then Dak looked at Riq, who was bristling.

“Mrs. Beeson,” Sera began, her cheeks blazing, “Riq is *not* our —”

A swift kick to her shin shut her up just in time.

“I’m glad you made it safely.” Mrs. Beeson began to hum as the three climbed down a ladder into a small, cool cellar, lit by lanterns. “You’ll find dry clothes to change into, and some water and soap for those cuts on your foot, miss. I’ll bring some food down in a bit.”

“Okay . . . thank you,” Sera said, but her voice was unsure. She shot questioning glances at Dak and Riq, and they returned them. Sera leaned toward them and whispered, “She’s a weird one. Do you really think she’s the local Hystorian?”

Dak nodded. But something sure seemed off.

“Excuse me,” he called up the ladder. “You know who Aristotle is, right?”

“No, dear,” Mrs. Beeson answered. “I’ve never met anyone by that name.”

A moment later the door overhead closed.

And then the lock clicked.

They heard the chair scraping the floor above to cover it.

The three incredibly smart, self-proclaimed geniuses had just willingly gotten themselves locked in a drafty cellar. All three turned to one another as Dak said, “Wait. What just happened?”



## Quakers

“SHE MIGHT be an abolitionist, but she’s no Hystorian,” Riq said. His stomach fell.

“But . . . but she said she was on our side,” Dak said. “Why else would she say that?”

Sera groaned. “She thinks Riq’s a slave and we came here to hide him.” She plopped to the floor and sat in a miserable heap. She sneezed, wiped her nose on her glove, and looked at Dak. “Why’d you kick me? I’m not going to let anybody think Riq is our slave. That’s just ludicrous, and I won’t do it.”

“I didn’t kick you,” Dak said.

Riq leaned against the wall. “I did,” he said. He dug the heels of his hands into his eye sockets and rubbed. He felt weary and defeated. And mad. Really mad.

“Why?”

“Because . . . well, because it’s 1850, and it’s complicated. I don’t even know why. But I do know we can’t stay locked up in here.” He set his jaw. “*I’m* not staying here, anyway.” He took the Square from Dak, who seemed happy to be rid of the device. It shook in Riq’s hands as he jabbed at the buttons. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Calm down,” he whispered so quietly that neither of the two heard him. The Square powered up, casting an eerie glow in the dimly lit cellar.

“Where precisely are we, again?” Dak asked. “What city?”

“Cambridge, Maryland. December 1850.” He waited a beat, and then added, “That’s in the United States. They speak your one language here.”

“Very funny. Well, I guess we don’t need you, then.”

“Fine.” Riq handed the Square back to Dak. “Good luck.”

Dak’s mouth fell open. “Okay, well, try and go, then.” He pointed to the ceiling. “There’s the door.”

“Come on, you guys.” Sera let her head rest against the wall. “Riq, don’t let him bait you,” she pleaded.

Riq felt the heat rise in his face, which was actually sort of helpful since it was not much warmer in the cellar than it was outside.

Dak’s look of surprise stayed on his face as he turned to Sera.

“What, *you* think I’m a pest now, too?”

Sera glared. “Are you saying you aren’t?”

“Just stop. Everybody stop it,” Riq said. “Okay? I’m sorry. Sera’s right. Bickering isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

“Who’s Bickering? I thought her name was Beeson,” Dak said, almost with a snort. But then he stopped. “I mean, I’m sorry, too, Ser, ol’ buddy.”

Sera wiped the remaining drips from her face with her sodden gloves, and then she stripped them off. “Fine. Just . . . turn around,” she said. “Now. I can’t stand these sopping-wet oversized doll clothes any longer.”

The boys whipped around to face the wall as Sera scuffled about, changing into a set of dry clothes. She muttered as she dressed: “Just please tell me we’re not in another stinking war.” She flapped her arms in the air. “Sorry this is taking me so long — I’m trying to air-dry.”

Dak guffawed. “Of course it’s not a war. Eighteen-fifty in the United States? Well, I guess technically there was the Mariposa Indian War with California in the fall of 1850, but everybody knows California was barely a state yet, and those gold diggers just jumped right into things and took over the Yosemite Valley. And that’s happening clear across the country!” He paused. “Oh, you’re thinking of the Civil War, I bet. Nope, not until next decade. But, hey” — he turned to Riq — “you said that we’re in Maryland, right?”

“About eighty-five times,” Riq said.

Dak furrowed his brow. “Well, things are definitely heating up here between the North and the South. There was a short time when slaves were escaping to the North, many of them traveling right through Maryland, but” — he put on a snooty professorial air — “history tells us that the plantation owners put the *squash* on that, if you get what I mean.”

Riq gave him a blank stare.



“The squash,” he said. “Capital *S*, capital *Q*. *SQuash*. Get it? The *SQ*. Many history buffs believe the pro-slavery movement was not just made up of random people with a similar belief, but that there were highly organized groups working behind the scenes. Groups who had other, much greater goals in mind — like what Brint said about that guy named Lincoln who got sabotaged from being president. Highly organized groups with a secret agenda? That sounds like *SQ* to me. These ‘unnamed groups’ *SQuashed* what were supposed to be safe houses for runaway slaves, then captured the runaways to sell them at auction, along with everybody who helped them. *Cha-ching!* How many times can you sell a slave?” He was really winding up now. “Furthermore, *some* people think,” he said, clearly meaning himself, “that the Civil War wouldn’t have lasted fifteen years if the slaves had been able to communicate with the Northern abolitionists and the abolitionists had gotten as organized as the proslavery groups were.” Dak looked sidelong at Riq. “You linguists know what that word *abolitionist* means, I suppose.”

Riq gave Dak a cool stare. “Signs point to yes.” Inwardly, Riq pictured himself wringing Dak’s neck. But he held back for the sake of peace.

“Okay, I’m done,” Sera said. “Your turn.” She wore a simple brown full-length dress with a matching kerchief at her neck and a broad-brimmed bonnet over her dark hair. Around her shoulders she’d wrapped a shawl that was a shade or two lighter than the dress, and she had found some thick socks and sturdy boots. “This is more like it,” she said. “Though I could really go for wearing pants again.”

Riq was glad to be in an era where pants were an option for men, at least. The dress-like tunic he’d worn in medieval Paris had taken some getting used to. Here, he was able to wear a white long-sleeve shirt and dark brown waistcoat, matching trousers, and black shoes. And a hat, too. Once he had finished dressing, he glanced at Sera in the dim light. She had her eyes closed and her forehead pressed against the wall, giving the boys privacy to change. She was still shivering in the drafty cellar despite finally being dry. Riq pulled his long jacket off and placed it over her shoulders, and then he sat down and picked up the *SQuare*.

She opened her eyes and turned to look at him. “Thanks,” she said. She sat down on the floor. “Are you sure you don’t need it?”

“I’m fine,” he said gruffly. “My manliness is more than enough to keep me warm.” He meant it as a joke, but like so many of his jokes, it sounded a bit mean once he’d said it.

Dak snorted and sat down. His suit was similar to Riq's, but it was too big on him, and it made him look puffy. But Riq was focused on the SQuare, studying the clue that they hadn't taken the time to solve all the way due to the storm. The answer came together in his head. He looked up, triumphant. And then his eyes grew wide. "Abolitionist . . . in danger?" he said. "Oh, no." Had the SQuash on the safe houses already happened? Was their abolitionist upstairs for real?

Dak cleared his throat loudly, startling Riq from his thoughts. "Well, guys," Dak announced, "I figured out why I don't like this place."

"Why's that?" Riq asked. Not that it should be much of a mystery. Wasn't the fact that he'd been mistaken for a slave enough?

"That woman is not a Friend."

"Of course not," Sera said. "We just met."

"I mean Friend with a capital *F*. Of the Religious Society of Friends."

"The what?"

"He means a Quaker, a member of a religious order known for being antislavery," Riq said. "She called herself a Friend when she opened the door, remember? That's what she meant." He turned to Dak, alarmed as his own thoughts began lining up with the younger boy's. "Why don't you think she's a Quaker?"

Whenever Dak felt he had something of historical value to add to a conversation, which was often, he grew geekily philosophical for his scant eleven years of life. "Let me start by saying," he said, "I do think this is a Quaker home — you can tell by the way it's decorated. But she's not a Quaker. She doesn't talk right — most Quakers used the terms *thee* and *thou* up until the mid-twentieth century. She's wearing a black dress, and throughout history, Quakers hardly ever wore black because it could be seen as either funeral garb or as fashionable. They were all about modesty. And she probably wouldn't introduce herself as a Friend to people she wasn't sure were Quakers, too. Plus, she was awfully proud to see us, and that just doesn't seem . . . Quakerish."

"Why would she pretend to be a Quaker if she wasn't one?" Riq asked, fearing the worst. "Are you sure you're not just stereotyping her?" He didn't add, "Like she did with me?"

Sera frowned at the SQuare. "There's only one reason I can think of why she'd lie," she said. "And that's because she wanted to trap us here. You're right, Riq. She's not a Hystorian. She's not even an abolitionist."

She glanced up at the trap door, and then buried her face in her hands.  
“She’s SQ.”



## Stop. No, Really. STOP.

“GREAT,” RIQ groaned. But he knew Sera was probably right. “Dak, what did you say about the SQ earlier? That they took over the safe houses? When did that happen?”

“Um, it was, uh, eighteen-Sasquach,” he mumbled, wiping his hand over his mouth as he spoke.

“What?”

Dak nodded and tapped his chin like a professor, and then coughed, “Eighteen-abibble.”

“Dak!” Sera said. “Come on.”

Dak’s face grew a brilliant crimson. “Welp, you see, the thing is, guys, is that, you know, really *any* of the Breaks we’ve already fixed could have changed the timing of things in 1850. Right? I mean, think about it. What if what we did with Dolley Madison changed things for now? Or with the Amancio brothers and Christopher Columbus? We can’t be sure.” He shook his head solemnly. “We just can’t.”

“Oh, Dak,” Sera said with a sigh. She patted his knee, and then spoke, almost with a tone of wonder. “You don’t actually know the answer, do you? Poor thing.”

Dak frowned. He didn’t look at her.

“That’s okay,” she went on. “It happens. Remember when I got a ninety-nine point seven five percent on my college prep chemistry exam last year? That was . . .” Her eyes clouded over and she shook her head. “That was . . . heartbreaking.” She patted his knee again. “I understand what you’re going through.”

Dak's face crumbled. "I have it somewhere. I know I do. In a book back home. Sometimes I guess I just need a book. It's a lot of pressure, sometimes, all those dates," he mumbled. He stared at the floor. "I thought it happened later than 1850 for sure, though, or I would have said something sooner."

"Well," Riq said in what he hoped was a reasonably kind voice, "at least we know what the Break is."

"We do?" Sera asked.

"It seems pretty clear to me," Riq replied. "We need to stop the SQ from taking over the safe houses and restore the . . . whatever it is they called this effort before it failed."

Dak didn't move his downturned head, but Riq heard him mutter, "It was called the Underground Railroad. But the term never really caught on."

Riq smiled and said, "Actually, I'm a lot more interested in this Break right now than I was twenty minutes ago." But then he clenched his fists, because out of nowhere, a Remnant wave came over him again, so hard and cold and vast that it felt like his whole existence was being sucked out through a throbbing hole in his chest. He grabbed at his vest and groaned.

He opened his eyes to find both Sera and Dak staring at him with deep concern. "I'm fine," he whispered. And then he offered a shaky smile. "Let's figure out where we're supposed to be, if it's not locked in the cellar of a fake abolitionist. Shall we?"

He was glad to have the Square as a distraction, and he gave his full attention to it once again. He pressed the `FIND A HISTORIAN` link. After a moment, the screen changed. His eyes took it in, and then he looked up. "It's some sort of word puzzle." He smiled, feeling a bit better already. "Right up my alley."

"So, it's the word *doofus* in sixteen languages?" Dak joked.

"Dak . . .," Sera said. Her eyes were closed again. She couldn't stop shivering.

"Sorry."

Sera opened one eye and looked at Riq. "Try to ignore him. He gets like this when he's tired. He'll chill out once we get some sleep."

Dak shot Sera a look that first said, "What do you know?" and then, reluctantly, "Well, you're probably right." But with Sera's eyes closed again, Dak's looks were lost on her. He turned instead to Riq. "So, what have we got, Dr. Linguist?"

Riq moved over to sit between Sera and Dak. He put his arm around Sera's shoulders as she nodded off, feeling her shivering and knowing desperately that they needed to keep her healthy, and pointed the Square to face Dak. "It looks like an old-fashioned telegram," he said. He read the words aloud:

Seek the fire not for your lantern candle oil or wood STOP Friends  
are friends after time STOP Tomorrows a mostly fair day STOP  
Visit and enjoy post breakfast STOP Office worries will wait STOP  
And then you can follow festivities including the eating and drinking  
STOP  
Sincerely  
Gourdon

"Say what?" Dak said. He studied it. "What is this, Ben Franklin's list of failed sayings that didn't make it into the Almanac? 'Friends are friends after time.' Really? I think that's the name of a pop song." Dak laughed. "'Office worries will wait'? What is this silly schtuff?"

Riq was quiet, studying the Square in his lap. His lips moved, and on his free hand his fingers tapped one by one against his thumb as he read the words and counted simultaneously. "I'm not sure yet," he said after a moment. "It's coded."

Dak nattered on and on about algorithms and spy code ciphers used in various wars until he had fairly worn himself out. When he had been quiet for a few minutes, Riq looked over at him. Dak was asleep now, too.

Riq smiled to himself. He was glad they were able to sleep. With all the various time changes, he really wasn't sure how many days in real time had gone by since he'd had a true full night of sleep. Somebody was always wanting to fight him, or . . . or he wanted to fight himself. His Remnants were like an inner war. And he had a feeling that this was the Break where it was all going to come to a head. It was this Break that had the potential to change his life forever — and maybe not for the better.



## The Family Tree

WHEN RIQ was a little kid and his parents had to work on things with the other Hystorians, they'd drop him off at his grandmother Phoebe's house. He stayed there so often it felt like his second home, and he loved her dearly — he still did. She would quiz him on his languages, and they'd do all sorts of puzzles and word problems together. She'd talk about the traveling she had done when she was younger, all over the world, but she said she always loved coming home best of all. Her family meant everything to her.

Riq had decided then that his family meant everything to him, too. He liked the way it sounded, especially when his parents were gone . . . which was often. He thought about it when he and his grandmother would snuggle on the couch watching old Japanese and Russian movies without subtitles, and she would ask him to translate the bits she didn't understand. He liked that she needed him, and he was never embarrassed to say that he needed her, too.

Before bed, Grandma Phoebe would bring out the scrapbooks — pictures of every place she'd ever been, photos and sketches of the family dating back to the mid-1700s, which was as far back as their line could be traced — before that, they'd come from somewhere in Africa, chained up in the bowels of a ship and brought across the ocean to be slaves in America. That story always made Riq feel awful inside.

But his ancestors were brave and strong, Grandma Phoebe told him, and he was very proud to be in a family like that. Some of them were Hystorians, she said, pointing them out in the scrapbook. It was so cool to

look at the pictures and imagine their lives. Riq would study the family tree and pretend to know which of the great-great-grandparents would be the cool ones who would travel the world, and which would be the embarrassing, peppermint-smelling kind who sat around the house wearing snugglies and drinking tea.

He said it out loud to his grandma one night, and she smiled. “I’m afraid you didn’t have any great-greats who sat around much, my dear. We have all worked hard for centuries. See this man? He’s your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Jacob. He fought with the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War. And this woman here” — she pointed to a different page — “is your great-great-great-great-great-great-aunt Minty, who escaped from slavery but disappeared shortly before the Civil War. And Minty’s niece, Kissy Bowley — who was *my* great-great-grandmother — was captured as a runaway slave. Her husband, John, who was free, had tried to buy her, and her aunt Minty tried to help, but they both failed, and Kissy got captured and bought by someone else. John was captured, too, and sold back into slavery again.”

“Even though he had been free? That’s not fair!”

Riq’s grandmother nodded. “Even though he had been free.” She frowned as she finished the story, even though she’d told it a million times. “Kissy never saw John again. Years later she remarried and had another child, my great-grandfather.”

“Wow,” Riq had said every time he heard the story. He’d imagine the backbreaking work on a plantation, sixteen or eighteen hours a day. The mean masters with their whips, though Grandma Phoebe said a few owners had been decent. The spirituals and the songs and the families, often torn apart.

Late into the wee hours of the morning, well after his grandmother had kissed him good night, Riq hid under his covers with a flashlight and studied the pictures, memorized his ancestors’ fancy names, and repeated the stories to himself. He loved learning about his family’s past. He loved history. It was in his blood, but it was also in his heart. And he wanted so badly to help fix everything so all the hard work and pain and suffering of his ancestors wasn’t for nothing.



Now, as Riq studied the clue with the overwhelming sense that this Break would decide something major for him, he thought about his



ancestors and wondered whose life had been changed because of the SQ during this time period. And what would happen to Riq if they fixed this Break? What would happen to his parents? To Grandma Phoebe? How could he risk messing with history without knowing what the consequences would be?

Maybe the only way Riq could be sure that his family history remained intact was to sabotage the mission — this one, at least.

He glanced at the Infinity Ring's satchel hanging from Sera's belt. He looked from one sleeping eleven-year-old to the other. Could he figure out how to program the Ring without either of them waking up?

But what would that solve? They'd just be furious at him for causing another unnecessary ripple, and they'd come back here anyway — they couldn't go on to the next Break until this one was done. The SQuare was the only thing that held the information to get them to the next place. And it didn't seem to want to give them anything about future Breaks until they'd fixed the Break they were in.

Maybe if he told Dak and Sera what he suspected about his Remnants, and about this Break in particular, they'd understand.

He laughed bitterly as he thought that through. "No way," he said. The last thing he needed was two little kids pitying him, or worse, sacrificing the mission to save him. He couldn't bear to have that hanging over him for the rest of his life.

He studied the words again. They began to swim in front of him. He was tired, too. Just as he was about to nod off, a few words still in focus seemed to pop out at him. He sat up and looked at them once more, then began mouthing the words and counting on his fingers again. "That's it!" he whispered.

When he heard the chair scrape above the trap door, Riq shoved the SQuare into its pouch and slipped it inside Dak's Quaker coat to hide it. Then he crept to the ladder, peering up.

The lock turned and the trap door opened.

Riq looked around wildly and hissed, "Sera!" He kicked Dak's foot. "Dak!"

They both nearly roused but fell asleep again as Mrs. Beeson's face appeared above Riq. Her half glasses rested on the tip of her nose and threatened to give in to the pull of gravity. "I brought you some bread. Climb up here and get it, boy."

Riq pressed his lips together at the slur and set his jaw, determined not to lash out. They were hungry, it was 1850, and apparently Hester

Beeson was used to bossing African-Americans around. He got that. With clenched teeth, he climbed the rungs, thinking briefly about fighting her and escaping, but he doubted he'd get very far with his skin color, and he couldn't leave the others, anyway. But if he could just detain her, say, in a closet or something, he'd have time to wake up Sera and Dak, and they could all get away.

He made that his plan. He climbed a few more rungs so that his upper body was out of the cellar, ready to spring up and surprise the woman.

He reached up with both hands to take the bread. With one hand he grabbed it and with the other he clasped Mrs. Beeson's wrist and rushed up the rest of the way, tossing the bread down into the cellar. Mrs. Beeson shrieked and hit him on the top of the head with her free hand, and then Riq felt four more hands on him, grabbing him under the arms and by the shirt collar — she was not alone. "Help!" he cried. He let his body go limp to throw his attackers off balance, but they were too strong. They held him fast, yanking his arms behind his back and throwing him forward to the floor.

"There, now!" their shouts rang out. "Got you another one, eh, Mary? You're going to make a fine piece of money in the morning for this one."

Riq twisted his head around. *Mary?* The lady had said her name was Hester Beeson, and she was the only woman here. Had anything she'd said to them been true?

Riq saw the triumphant smile on her face and knew that she had been telling the truth about one thing. She'd been happy to see them. They'd walked right into her trap.

Two burly men hauled him to his feet and a third tied his wrists together in front of him. He fought off his panic, remembering the clue. "Sera! Dak!" he yelled as loud as he could. "Every third! Every third! Every third!" He yelled it over and over until one man clamped a hand over his mouth. Riq bit down on the fleshy palm, hard, and when the hand pulled away, Riq had one last chance to scream, "Dak, Sera, *listen to me!* Every third WORD!" But then the bitten man reared back with his fist and punched Riq in the nose. All he saw after that were stars.



## Bread Wound to the Face

IT WAS a blow to the face that woke Sera from a dead sleep, followed by the sounds of shouting men and pounding footsteps overhead. It took her a minute to remember where she was, and even longer to process that the thing that had hit her in the jaw was a loaf of bread, which now lay at her side. One of the shouting voices seemed familiar but nothing was computing properly in her brain.

Dak sat up, too. “What the —” He looked around. “Where’s Riq?”

Tears swam in Sera’s eyes — the unavoidable, just-got-hit-in-the-face kind of tears. “I heard him yelling. Did he escape without us?” She struggled to her feet, gingerly moving her jaw from side to side to see if the crusty loaf had done any serious damage. “He said he wasn’t staying here, but I didn’t think he’d ditch us.”

“Did he take off?” Dak said. He got to his feet. “What a jerk! Why would he do that? I’m so telling Brint and Mari.”

They could hear heavy boots pounding the floor above them and muffled noises. There was a flurry of activity and one last shout from Riq. “Dak, Sera, *listen to me!* Every third WORD!” The front door slammed.

It didn’t sound like an escape; it sounded like an abduction. Sera and Dak scabbled over to the ladder. Sera jumped up first and climbed as fast as she could. She reached for the opening.

Just then the trap door slammed down on Sera’s fingers and she yanked them away, squealing in pain as the lock clicked. Furious, Sera pounded her fist on the wooden door above her, and she and Dak shouted.

“Hey, you big bully! Open up! What are you doing? Let us out of here! What have you done to our friend?”

The only sound they heard in response was that of the rug and the chair being dragged over the trap door, followed by dainty footsteps walking away. “Ugh!” Sera slammed her hand into the ceiling one last time, furious and disgusted. Now her hand hurt, too, and her fingertips pulsed with pain. She looked up at the backside of the lock. From this side, the lock mechanism had a partial, unfinished cover over it. Sera tried to maneuver her pinkie into the narrow space so that she could push the lock open, but her pinkie was too thick and it wouldn’t bend the right way. Sera glanced around the sparse cellar, having little hope for anything that could help them out of this jam.

Dak jumped down off the lower rung to the floor of the cellar, and Sera climbed down the ladder.

“Do you still have the lock pick we got from King Louis?” Dak asked.

“Wrong type of lock,” Sera said. “That technology’s developed a lot since 1792.”

“So what do we do?”

“First thing first,” Sera said gravely. She gave Dak the hairy eyeball and put her hands on his shoulders. “I’m going to ask you this question very seriously, so don’t mess it up. Ready?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Dak said, squirming a little.

“Okay, here goes.” She moistened her lips and said, “Do. You. Have. The SQUARE? Because I don’t.”

Dak’s eyes widened. The look of fear on his face told Sera he wasn’t goofing around. “Riq had it. . . .” His voice trailed off as he whipped his head around to look about the room.

“Oh, please, not again,” muttered Sera. She went to the pile of wet clothing and started tossing it around the room, searching.

“Careful,” Dak said, swooping in to grab a bottle of soda that Sera had thrown aside. “That’s one of the first carbonated beverages ever made. It’s an irreplaceable souvenir.”

Sera pawed her way through the supply shelves, barely pausing to throw him a dirty look. “Did you steal that from the President’s House?”

“I saved it!” Dak insisted. “Don’t you remember the invasion?”

“Dak, focus! Did you check your pockets?” Sera said, her voice pitching higher as they ran out of places to look. She went over to him and started giving him a pat down, and she wasn’t gentle.

“Easy!” Dak cried.

“Hey!” Sera exclaimed when she smacked him in the chest and hit something solid. “What’s this in your jacket?” She stepped back so he could find out for himself.

Dak pulled back the lapel of his jacket and found the inside pocket. “Wow,” he said, looking inside it. “You could fit a whole can of SQueez Cheez in here.” He reached in and pulled out the familiar leather pouch.

Sera smiled weakly in relief. “Whew,” she said. “You big jerk! You scared me. How could you forget that you put it there?”

“I didn’t put it there. Riq must have. Before they —” Dak bit his lip. “Yeah. That was pretty smart of him.”

Sera squinched her eyes shut. It made her sore jaw hurt a little. “And he threw us the bread so we could eat something.”

Dak nodded. “I guess he’s not so bad.”

Sera looked at her friend, the guy who had been her bestie since before she could remember, and smiled. “Like I’ve been telling you. He’s not bad at all. He’s a really decent guy. Now,” she said, taking a deep, determined breath, “how are we going to find him?”



## The Clue

“I DON’T know if you caught this,” Dak said, feeling kind of terrible about Riq getting captured and dragged away while they slept, “but Riq was yelling something besides *help*.”

“Every third word,” Sera said. “Yeah, I heard it. What does it mean?”

“I’m guessing he figured out the clue — it was a word puzzle.” Dak pulled the SQuare out of the pouch, reentered the password (“Password”) because it had timed out, and then the clue appeared again. “See, it’s a telegram. STOP means to end the sentence.”

“Why wouldn’t they just use a period?”

“The word *stop* is understood around the world. Plus, when telegrams were sent, each punctuation mark cost the same price as a full word, but it was a lot easier to misplace a dot than a whole word, so people ix-nayed the unctuation-pay.” He looked up with a grin. “Hey! I guess I know two languages after all. I can’t wait to tell Riq when we find him.” He glanced at Sera and said in a more serious voice, “Because we *will* find him.” He showed the telegram to Sera.

Seek the fire not for your lantern candle oil or wood STOP Friends  
are friends after time STOP Tomorrows a mostly fair day STOP  
Visit and enjoy post breakfast STOP Office worries will wait STOP  
And then you can follow festivities including the eating and drinking  
STOP

Sincerely  
Gourdon

Sera read it a few times. “It would make more sense with punctuation.”

“That’s not the point. It’s a code. What it actually says isn’t really what it’s trying to say.”

“Yeah, I get it, Sherlock.” Sera squinted at the words. “Okay, so, every third word — is that with or without the STOPS?”

Dak shrugged.

“Figuring it’s with, then this says: Fire your oil stop friends stop mostly stop enjoy stop will and can . . .” She shook her head. “This is stupid.”

“So take the stops out.”

“Fire your oil friends after — wait, so do I skip the word *stop* only if it’s the word I land on?”

“No idea. Historian here, not a know-it-all linguist.”

Sera glared at Dak.

“Yeah . . . I said that without thinking, didn’t I,” Dak said. “I’ll keep the linguist jokes to myself for now. Sorry.”

“There’s always a first time. Every day, with you.” She struggled with the telegram for a while.

Dak took a hunk of bread and started eating. “Could really use some cheese.” He handed the loaf to Sera and she ripped a chunk off, too, nibbling at it as she worked the clue.

“*Ohh!*” she said after a while, her mouth full. “We have to start with the first word and then do every third after that. He didn’t say that.”

“Shame on him for not explaining it better while being tackled and captured.”

She chewed and swallowed. “How does this sound?” She read it once to herself, and then she read it out loud, guessing where the punctuation went. “Seek not lantern or Friends. After tomorrow’s fair, visit post office!” Sera looked up excitedly, and then turned back to finish it. “Wait, then follow the drinking Gourdon.”

Dak smirked. “‘Seek not lantern or Friends.’ Ahh-hahaha. Now you tell us.”

“We should have figured out the clue first before coming here.” Sera frowned. “It’s my fault.”

Dak put his hand on Sera's shoulder. "Girl-dude, it's fine. Under the circumstances, we would have drowned or frozen to death before we figured it out."

Sera went back over the words once more, memorizing them. "After tomorrow's fair.' So we need to find the fair tomorrow."

"Then we'll go to the post office, stand around for a while, and follow some drunk guy named Gourdon."

"I guess."

"That should be interesting. I hope he doesn't ralph his guts out," Dak said.

"I hope he does. Did you know you can find out a lot about the human digestive system by studying —"

"Uhm, I kind of can't believe this, but you just grossed me out."

"Anyway, we'll get to that part of the clue eventually, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. If we don't get out of here, we'll never find the fair. Or Riq, for that matter."

"Well," Dak said, "nobody said fixing history would be easy. I guess this means we go to Plan B."





## Captured

RIQ HAD broken his nose once before, in elementary school when he took a dodgeball to the face at close range from some crazy dude named Matt who was actually aiming for a girl. And now it was definitely broken again. He knew for sure because he could literally see the skin of his nose puffing up in front of and around his eyes. And then, of course, there was all the blood. And the pain. As the three men had dragged him out the front door and into the storm, tossing him in the back of a wagon and chaining him there, all he could do was try to ignore the pain and keep his nose protected.

But, even injured, he was a Hystorian. And he was a good one. So he also kept track of where the wagon was taking him in case he had a chance to escape. He tried loosening the rope around his wrists and tugging at the chain that held him in the wagon, but they were both stuck tight.

After an hour's ride in the dark, they came to a stop. The men got off the wagon seat and went into a house, leaving Riq alone. He yanked and tugged at the chain, bracing his feet against the side of the wagon and pulling with all his might, but it wouldn't budge. At least the activity helped keep him warm — once again he was soaked through from rain. He wished for the coat he'd left behind with Sera.

Ten minutes later, the men came out.

Riq could sit up just far enough to see over the side. The men were leading a woman and a young boy to the wagon. They came along quietly

enough, but Riq heard the cries of a baby as they approached. With surprise, he realized the woman held an infant in her arms.

At his mother's urging, the boy crawled up into the wagon, and she followed. Riq reached out his bound hands as best he could to help the little guy keep his balance in the gusty wind, as the woman climbed aboard with the baby. She held her head high and set her lips as the men chained one of her wrists to the wagon on the side opposite Riq. She did her best to shield her baby from the weather.

Riq looked at the boy, who appeared to be about five or six and was scowling into the pelting rain. "If you lie down here against the side, you'll stay dry," Riq said. "The wind blows the rain sideways and this will protect you. See? It's cozy."

The boy looked at his mother, who nodded. He scooted to Riq's side but stayed as far away from him as possible.

When the wagon lurched and moved again, the wheels bounced on the uneven, rain-soaked ground, which sent piercing pain through Riq's skull. He leaned forward. "Ma'am," Riq said, "forgive me for asking, and I apologize for my appearance, but do you know where they're taking us?"

The woman gave Riq a long look, sizing him up. "Are you a freedman?"

Riq hesitated. He knew the term, and while technically it wasn't accurate, he said, "Yes."

"So they got you with the new law?"

"Um," Riq said, "which one would that be?"

The woman pursed her lips. "You've never heard of the Bloodhound Law?"

Riq shook his head. "No, ma'am. I don't know of it."

"It passed a few months back. Used to be, the North was a safe haven for former slaves. But now free blacks can be picked up off the street in any state in the nation and sold back south. No trial. Nothing. So everybody's hunting."

Riq tried not to gape. "That's . . . barbaric."

"It's far from justice, but it's the law," the woman said. "And it gets worse. Anyone accused of helping a runaway slave is in violation of the law and has to face all sorts of trouble. It's gotten so a person can't know who to trust."

"Were . . . were you just captured?" Riq asked.

”No. Ms. Brodess has decided to sell us. We’re all being auctioned.”  
She gave him a hard look.

“*We* — meaning you three?”

She shook her head, and her words were heavy. “*We*. Meaning we in this wagon. Tomorrow. Once they get you, they don’t waste time.”

Riq’s lips parted in shock, then clamped shut in fury. He swallowed hard, the anger burning and turning to dry ashes in his throat as a flood of hopelessness washed through him. He closed his eyelids and slumped against the side of the wagon, rain pelting like tiny stones to the back of his head. A hot tear slipped from the corner of his eye before he could stop it.



## Plan B

“SO, WHAT exactly is Plan B?” Sera asked. She’d wandered over to the supply shelves and was picking through them, examining each item curiously.

“I don’t know yet.”

Sera smiled as she spotted a burlap bag with the words *Saltville, Virginia* stamped on it. She shoved her bonnet off her head so it hung down her back, and scratched her scalp. Then she picked up the bag. She opened it and looked inside. “Aha,” she said softly to herself, and then she turned toward Dak. “Well, *I* know.”

“You do?” Dak asked. “That’s awesome! What is it?”

“It’s time for a little chemical experiment.”

Dak’s eyes grew wide. He stepped back. “No way. Not like the time with the —”

“No, no, no,” Sera said, impatient. “Geez, Dak will you let it go? That was third grade.”

“Still, I’ve barely just grown my eyebrows back, thank you very much.”

Sera waved off his fears. “Your eyebrows are safe. But I am going to need a sacrifice from you.”

Dak’s eyes grew wider still. “Like what, like a-a — *human* sacrifice?”

“Oh, stop it. All I need is that fancy bottle of French soda that you got from the President’s House.”

Dak gasped and sputtered. “Blasphemy! That’s even *worse!* Do you *know* how many of these still exist in our time?”

“Actually, I don’t care. Because do you wanna know what?”

“What?”

“Chicken butt,” they both said automatically.

“Okay, seriously, though,” Sera continued. “If we don’t get out of this cellar, guess how many people you’d be able to show that fancy French confectionery’s bottle of soda to?”

“Well, there’s Mrs. Beeson.”

“In our time, you dork.”

Dak scowled. “Nobody.”

“Right. Nobody. But if you save the world with me, and we go back to our time as heroes, and we get really high-paying jobs and make zillions of dollars because we’re so amazing, then you can *buy* a bottle just like it.”

Dak nearly twisted in half with his overdramatic gesturing. “But that’s the *poooooint*, *Seraaaa!* The last authentic bottles dating back to the eighteenth century got destroyed in an earthquake! There aren’t any left to buy anywhere in the whole entire universe.”

“Dak.”

“*Whaaat?*” he whined.

“Calm down.”

“Right, okay,” Dak said miserably. “Wait. Why should I? This is very upsetting.”

“Because when we fix the Breaks and things go back to the way they were supposed to be, those earthquakes won’t have happened in the first place.”

Dak opened his mouth, and then closed it again. He giggled. “Oh, yeah.” He giggled some more, and then he stopped. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Sera lied. “Now, hand it over. And then we’re going to rest for a little bit. We want that phony abolitionist to be sound asleep when we bust out of here.”



They left the lamps glowing, knowing they’d need them later, and tried to sleep. But their minds were whirring. Just before Dak dozed off, he muttered, “What we really need is a secret word that we can use to tell each other to be careful and stuff.”

Sera rolled over and propped herself up on her elbow. “How about *eighteen-abibble?*”

Dak snorted. “Perfect.”



## A Long Night

RIQ FOUND himself out of the rain eventually, at least. He and the woman — Kessiah, she said her name was — and her two children were finally taken off the wagon and brought to the slave quarters of a plantation. They had traveled quite a long way to pick up the family, but then Riq noticed they'd turned around and ended up in the little town area not far from the cornfield where he and the other time travelers had first arrived. He recognized the ships in the harbor. It gave him hope that if he could get away, he'd be able to find Sera and Dak.

But he remained shackled, locked up in a small room with Kessiah and her children, and no matter how hard he tugged on the chain, it wouldn't come loose.

When they had arrived, a black woman wearing an apron had come to clean up Riq's wounds and give him a fresh shirt, both of which he appreciated immensely.

"Thank you for the clean shirt," he said. "I must have looked frightening."

The woman flashed Riq a startled look, and then turned her eyes to the floor. She looked as though she wanted to say something in response yet didn't dare. She looked scared. Riq decided not to push it.

Later Kessiah told him that the woman hadn't been acting out of kindness. "You have to look good for the auction to get more bids, so they clean you up," she explained. "If you're covered in blood, nobody wants to buy you. They think you're a troublemaker."

"Maybe I plan to be."

Kessiah gave him a small smile. “’Fraid that attitude won’t last too long.”

Riq frowned. “What do you mean?”

“They’ll beat the trouble out of you in time. They always do.”

Riq sank back against the wall that he was chained to and shook his head. “You know,” he said, “I really can’t believe this is happening.”

Kessiah shook her head, too. “I still can’t, and I’ve never been free,” she said softly.

While her children slept, Kessiah stared out the window into the darkness. She seemed agitated. Nervous.

Riq wasn’t all too comfortable either, but despite his anxiety and the howling wind, he couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer. He slept.



When he woke up, the storm had passed and the sun was just coming up. Kessiah was asleep, and her son had snuggled up next to Riq. Riq looked at the sleeping boy, and the lump rose in his throat again. He thought about the stories his grandmother had told him, and the songs she’d played and sung for him when he was the little boy’s age. The stories had been meaningful back then even though he hadn’t understood the depth of them. But now he was sitting smack dab in his ancestors’ shoes, shackled like a criminal even though he’d done nothing wrong, and he was about to stand on the auction block to be sold to the highest bidder like he was a horse at a trade show.

It was all so strange, but the surreal aspect from the dead of night had become very real with the dawning light. What if Sera and Dak couldn’t escape? What if they did escape but didn’t find him? What if he were sold to someone who took him far away? What if *he* couldn’t escape either? Would he be stuck here forever to live his life out like this?

The child who sat with him probably knew nothing different for his life. Riq wondered if the little boy would ever be free.

The boy woke when the woman with the apron came into the room. She handed Riq a warm bowl of food and a cup of water. She did the same for the little boy, and then returned with more for Kessiah, setting it by her head so she could eat it when she woke up.

“Thank you,” Riq said. There was corn bread and some sort of fish in the bowl. He balanced it on his knee and ate gratefully. The little boy ate the food like he hadn’t eaten in a long time.



“You want some more?” Riq asked. He held the rest of his corn bread out to the boy.

“Yessir,” the boy said, and took it.

“James,” Kessiah said. Her eyes were open now, but she hadn’t moved. “What do you say to Riq?”

“Thank you,” James said.

Riq smiled. “It’s all right.”

Kessiah regarded him. “That was kind of you,” she said.

A few women began singing outside — slaves who were hard at work on the plantation. Riq could hear them through the cracks in the doors and windows. Kessiah turned swiftly and strained to see and hear. They sang a song as they worked:

*There’s singing here,  
There’s singing there.  
I believe down in my soul  
There’s singing everywhere.*

*Run, mourner, run!  
Lo! says the bible,  
Run, mourner, run  
Lo! is the way . . .*

When the song’s words became clear, Kessiah sucked in a breath. She closed her eyes for a moment, and then she turned back, a look of peace on her face. “All’s not lost after all,” she said softly.

Riq furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?” he whispered.

“It’s a song my . . . someone arranged to be sung as a signal.” She looked at James and then back to Riq. “I don’t dare explain right now.” She nodded her head toward the boy, and then looked away. “He can’t tell what he doesn’t know,” she said softly. When the song outside repeated, she hummed along, and when they reached the second verse, she sang out in a gorgeous voice, one line only. *Run, mourner, run.*

Riq felt something welling up inside him. He didn’t quite understand all that was happening, or what meaning she was trying to get across exactly, but Grandma Phoebe had told him about the power of the

spirituals, religious songs spread by slaves in the South. And for the first time since his capture, he felt hope.

They heard men's voices. "Don't fight, now," Kessiah whispered. "Do as I do."

Seconds later, the three men from the night before burst into the room, unshackled Riq and Kessiah from the rings on the wall, and hooked them together instead. Kessiah picked up the baby, and Riq grabbed James's hand as the men led them to the door and outside to the street. They walked half a mile to town as the voices of the slaves they were leaving behind grew faint. When they reached the steps of a courthouse, the men stopped and told Riq and Kessiah where to stand. And there, posted on the wall of the courthouse in front of Riq, was a flyer that made him gasp.

# TO BE SOLD

## BY PUBLIC AUCTION

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*On Monday, December 9th, 1850*

In Front of the COURTHOUSE

The Four Following

# Slaves.

KISSY, about 25, an excellent Laborer  
with children:

JAMES ALFRED, about 6

ARAMINTA, an infant; and

RICK, about 16, inexperienced, suitable for  
Labor or Household

The woman belonging to Eliza Ann Brodess  
and the man belonging to Mary Lockett



## **Busting Out**

SERA STOOD on the ladder, a handful of rock salt from the burlap bag in one hand and the open bottle of French soda in the other. She had changed back into her 1814 puffy bloomers and dress, with the slip tied over her hair.

“Can I at least have a taste first?” Dak asked.

“Sure, but hurry,” Sera said. “And keep the noise down. We don’t want to wake her up.”

“Got it, chief. I’ll be as far away from your mad science as possible. Trust me.” He took a sip and rolled it around his mouth like he’d seen his parents do with wine. And then he made a face. “Yuck.” He handed it back to her.

“Just quit goofing off and be ready.”

“How is this supposed to break the door down, anyway? Is this like the soda-and-candy-reaction thing?”

“That’s exactly what it is, only with rock salt — what’s important are the tiny holes in the salt to create the pressure and explosion. And it won’t be able to blast the door open. It’s just going to unlock it.”

“So, no fire involved?”

“No fire. That would be dangerous in an enclosed, windowless room.” Sera gave him a patronizing smile. “Although, if only you’d had a can of SQueez Cheez . . . now that plus the oil lamp could have been a really awesome explosion.”

“Stop disrespecting my favorite foods already,” Dak said. He rolled his eyes and went back to the corner of the cellar. “Okay, I’m ready —

I've got all our stuff in my coat, including your Quaker clothes. I freaking love this coat, by the way. So many pockets."

"Good — keep my clothes dry if you can." She swallowed hard. "We're going to experience extreme stickiness, but it can't be helped."

Dak zipped his lips and hovered against the wall. He put his Quaker hat on to protect himself further.

Sera glanced back at him, and then held her hand above the bottle. "Stay back — in case I fall."

Dak nodded. Sera figured he wasn't planning to catch her.

"Three, two . . ." Sera whispered. She wrapped one leg around the ladder to keep herself from losing balance, and she aimed the bottle toward the little hole that housed the spinning lock mechanism. "One."

She shoved the rock salt into the neck of the bottle as quickly as she could, and pointed. The liquid shot out at great force just inches from the hole, but Sera couldn't see a thing as frothy soda bubbles rained down all over her face. All she could do was squint and hope the pressure of the liquid was forceful enough to push the rotating lock a quarter turn.

It rained for ten seconds before the foam slowed. "Here," Sera said, "I saved you the bottle."

Dak ran to grab it and then retreated once again. Sera peered up at the lock. The entire ceiling above her dripped with soda. Gingerly, she pushed on the trap door.

It moved.

She did a silent happy dance on the ladder, and then scurried down. Dak turned to face the wall as Sera whipped off her 1814 clothes, wiped her face with them, and then grabbed her Quaker clothes from Dak, who had pulled them from his coat and tossed them over his shoulder to her. She got into them at full speed, and though she was still a bit sticky, it wasn't too bad. And there wouldn't be any bees around in December, she hoped. That had been her main concern about being covered in sugar.

"Remember," she said in a soft voice, "there's the little rug and the chair above the door, but with any luck you'll be able to get an arm out before the chair tips. If it doesn't move easily we're going to have to really whale on it to knock it over, and run for our lives." She patted the satchel beneath her shawl. "I've got the Ring."

Dak tapped his coat. "I've got the SQuare."

"Amazing," they both whispered together, and Sera added, "Now let's go find our friend and follow our clues."

Dak gently pushed up on the trap door. It kept going and going, nearly to a forty-five-degree angle before it hit the chair seat. Dak pushed himself up to the next rung, his head going partway through the opening, and he looked all around. Then he dropped back below once again. “I think we can slide out without moving the chair at all,” he whispered.

Sera’s eyes widened. She nodded and gave him the thumbs-up.

Dak returned the gesture, and he climbed and slid up through the opening. One of his pockets nearly got caught on a nail, but Sera quickly unhooked it before it tore. In a moment, he was splayed out in the hallway. He scooted out of the way as Sera followed suit, and, being a bit smaller, had no trouble at all getting out despite the extra bulk of the dress and Riq’s jacket.

But as she pulled her feet out of the opening, her bootlace snagged on the same nail that had given Dak trouble. She jerked her foot and it came loose, sending the trap door slamming down.

Sera gasped. She looked at Dak. He grabbed her arm and yanked her to her feet, and they careened down the hallway just as they heard someone coming from the next room. “Who’s there?” Mrs. Beeson called out. Sharp footsteps grew louder at an alarming rate.

“Run!” Sera cried.

“Running!” Dak said.

Sera reached the front door, whipped it open, and flew outside with Dak right behind. Mrs. Beeson, or whoever she was, ran out onto the porch and into the yard after them, but she was no match for the two.

“Thanks for the bread!” Dak called out over his shoulder.

Sera poked her elbow into Dak’s ribs. “Come on,” she said. “Over here.” They sprinted around the cornfield toward the shed they’d seen the night before. The door was closed now and the lantern was gone, perhaps blown away by the gale. She peeked in just to make sure Riq wasn’t hiding inside. It was empty.

“At least the storm passed,” Sera said. “Now, if you were Riq, where would you be?”

Dak looked all around. “If I were mistaken as a runaway slave and captured,” he mused, “I guess I’d be either on a plantation working, or . . .”

“Or what?”

Dak looked at Sera. “Or killed.”

Sera shuddered, and then she set her jaw in anger. “I don’t get it. How could anybody treat another human being like that?” she cried.

Dak didn't have an answer to that one.



## The Fair

DAK AND Sera checked the cornfield first, agreeing that if Riq had managed to escape, he might have gone there — it was sort of an unspoken rule of travel that the place you arrived was a good place to use as a meeting spot in case somebody got lost. But Riq wasn't there.

They headed toward town. "We can ask around, maybe," suggested Dak. "See if anybody's seen him."

Sera nodded. "We'll go door-to-door if we have to."

As they approached the town, things grew a bit livelier. People walked the streets, coming in and out of buildings and taverns, laughing and chatting. There was almost a spirit of adventure in the air. Dak muttered out of the side of his mouth, "Do you think this is the fair?"

Sera shrugged. "Maybe. Look, there must be a street performer over there or something. There's a crowd gathering. Act like we belong here. We should be careful in case that horrible woman shows up." She pulled her bonnet back on her head and tucked her hair back.

They drew close to the gathering and tried to peer over the shoulders of the townspeople, but there were a lot of bonnets and hats in the way, so they moved around the edge of the crowd, trying to see what was happening.

"Excuse me," Dak said, tapping a shoulder of a dark-skinned man in front of him.

The man stepped aside.

"No, sorry, I mean I have a question," Dak said. "What's going on here?"



The man glanced at Dak. "It's an auction."

"Cool. What kinds of stuff? Any unopened bottles of French soda from, say, the eighteenth century? Ish?"

Sera jabbed Dak.

The man gave Dak a harder look. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. "No, not that I know of. It's a slave auction." He pulled an old pocket watch with a scratched face from his waistcoat pocket, then replaced it and looked around. "Do thee read?"

"Yes," Dak said.

"Thou will find signs posted with details. It seems there is one more slave than I expected." He looked nervous. "And if you will excuse me," he said to both of them, "I must go." He turned on his heel and walked away from the small crowd and across the street.

"A slave auction? That's horrendous!" said Sera. "Come on. We need to see what's happening. Maybe this is why we landed here."

Dak shrugged and followed Sera as she weaved her way through the crowd.

Soon, a voice rose higher than all the others, and the crowd hushed. "Welcome!" the man said. "Attention! Take a close look at these fine slaves and get your bids ready. We've a prime young woman laborer with two children, not to be split. Think potential. A boy around six and an infant girl, two generations of work for the price of one. And we have a strong young man around sixteen, suitable for hard labor or household work. Last chance to examine them is now. Bidding begins in thirty minutes!"

Sera and Dak pushed to the front, much to the annoyance of the adults who were waiting to get a closer look at the slaves. Finally, Dak made it around the bulk of the townspeople and found an open space off to the side. He looked over at the short makeshift platform in front of the courthouse, and then he gasped.

"Gorgonzola milquetoast!" he cried, turning to Sera. "It's Riq!"



## Kissy Bowley

Riq read the flyer again as he and Kessiah stood on the platform for viewing. It was a distraction from all the eyes that were on him. The first time he read it, his attention had been drawn to his own name, spelled in the style of the era, but something else stuck out, too. The flyer said the woman's name was Kissy.

"Kessiah," Riq whispered. They were chained together at the ankles now, and their hands were free.

She just barely tilted her head, indicating she was listening.

"The flyer says your name is Kissy Bowley. Is it really Kissy?"

"Folks call me Kissy. Kessiah is my given name."

Riq was quiet for a moment. How could he ask her without sounding odd? "Do you have an aunt, by any chance?"

"I have about a dozen aunts."

Riq shoved his hands in his pockets and looked out at the sea of mostly white faces scrutinizing him. He wanted to kick each and every one of them. "Aunt Minty?" He said it so softly that he wasn't sure she heard him.

"Who are you?" she asked, her tone suspicious.

"I'm —" Riq squeezed his eyes shut as a Remnant of cold nothingness socked him in the chest. He couldn't finish the sentence. He didn't know what to say.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "How do you know my aunt?"

Riq hazarded a glance and caught her eye. He tried again. "I'm — I think we're . . . related."

“Quiet down,” one of the handlers said, poking Riq in the back with a stick or a cane or something.

He didn’t dare speak again.



Sera stared. There was Riq, standing on the wooden platform, shoulders uncharacteristically sloped forward, and a look of emptiness on his face that pierced through Sera’s gut. “What on earth?” she muttered. And then she stomped over to the front of the crowd. “Out of my way,” she said whenever anyone tried to stop her. “That young man is not a slave.”

“Sera!” Dak cried, and then he went charging after her. When he reached her, he whispered, “I know what’s happening here is way wrong, but we *cannot* mess this up, so don’t blow a gasket in public, okay? We don’t need to make things worse for Riq, and we don’t need a bunch of SQ figuring us out. I’m sure Bigmouth Beeson has already informed them —”

By this time they had reached the front of the throng. A simple rope separated them from the people on the platform, and Sera saw that Riq was shackled to the woman next to him. Sera pushed in against the rope as far as she could go so that she was only a few feet away from him and no one stood next to her.

“Riq,” she said in a harsh whisper.

He lifted his head. At the sight of her and Dak, Riq’s lips parted slightly, then he closed them again. His eyelids closed for a long second, and he took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. When he opened them again, he looked directly into Sera’s eyes. She could see his were swimming. He pressed his lips together and looked away.

Sera studied him. “Oh, no — they broke your nose?” Her bread-to-the-face incident seemed embarrassingly minor compared to this. She felt heat rising from her neck for having made such a big deal about it. When Riq didn’t answer her, she set her jaw and muttered to Dak over her shoulder, “He’s not allowed to talk to us.” Angry tears came to her eyes. “This is so wrong.”

“It’s awful,” Dak said. “We need to get him out of here. But we have to play it smart.” He nodded toward the big men roaming the area, looking like they wanted to pound and slice anybody who ventured too close to them or the slaves.

Sera fingered the lapels of the coat she so desperately wanted to give back to Riq, but she wasn't sure what would happen if she did it — there were five burly men surrounding the platform, and she didn't want anybody to get in trouble. Especially Riq.

She dropped her hands and clenched them at her sides. “Where on earth are the people who can help us?” she whispered to Dak. “There has to be someone who can help.” She looked around. The slave woman lifted her head and caught Sera's eye, and then immediately shifted her gaze to a spot in the distance. She remained staring at it, unmoving.

“Did she hear me?” Sera whispered to Dak. She watched the woman gaze steadily, and then Sera slowly turned to look over her shoulder. All she could see was an angry-looking man's giant nostrils and bloodshot eyes. She looked up higher, above his head, and saw a squat steeple across the street.

Sera smiled politely at the man, then slowly turned back to face the podium. “The church?” she whispered.

Sera thought she saw the woman nod, but it was so slight that Sera couldn't tell for sure. However, she was certain the woman didn't shake her head no, so she supposed her hunch was correct.

The crowd pushed in on Sera, and she strained against the rope, trying to come up with a plan before anyone pushed her aside. Dak began to chatter with people behind Sera, and she could tell he was distracting them purposely. She looked at Riq one last time, wishing he wasn't tethered to the woman. This would be one time she'd be willing to use the Infinity Ring to warp the three of them out of here, but she couldn't very well take the woman and baby with her, leaving the little boy standing here alone — that would be terrible. The poor little boy would never get over it.

“We'll get you out of here,” Sera whispered to Riq. Her tone was confident, but at the moment, she had not one single idea how she would keep her promise.

Riq didn't react. He just swallowed hard and kept his eyes to the ground.



## Where the Crud Are the Hystorians?

Sera and Dak left their spot in front of the courthouse steps and pushed to the outskirts of the crowd so they could talk without a bunch of rotten slave buyers breathing down their necks. “Where the crud are the Hystorians?” Dak asked when they finally had some space.

Sera smacked him right in the SQuare. “According to the clue,” she said, “they’re either at the post office or some guy named Gourdon will lead us to one. I don’t know.”

“But it’s never taken us this long to find help before. And we even speak this language!”

Sera glanced down the block and across the street to the little church that the woman — whose name was Kissy according to the auction sign — had stared at. “We don’t have time to run there now before the auction starts. We can’t let Riq out of our sight.”

“The clue says we need the post office, not the church.”

Sera worked the edges of her shawl, her eyes darting this way and that. “I know,” she said. “But did you see her look up when she heard me say we needed help?”

“You mean like Mrs. Fake SQuaker woman did?” Dak was skeptical. “Something very fishy is happening.”

The dark-skinned Quaker man that Dak had talked to earlier now walked back toward them from across the street, returning from wherever he’d gone. He was singing a song, and when he reached them, he gave them a meaningful look.

“Sir?” Dak said.

The man stopped. “How can I help thee?”

“Where’s the post office?”

“There’s no post office in Cambridge.”

Dak stared at him. “Well, where’s the nearest one?”

The man raised a finger to his lips, drawing it over his mustache in a contemplative manner. “You’re not from around here, are you, children?”

“No,” Sera butted in. “We’re not.” She gave him a long look.

He nodded slowly and a smile played at the corner of his mouth. “I see. I reckon the post office you’re looking for is in that church, then.”

Dak and Sera looked at each other, and then back at the man.

“Nobody’s there to help you now, though. Probably not until this afternoon.” He tipped his hat and began to walk away.

“Thank you,” Sera called out after him. “Sir?”

He turned.

“Is your name Gourdon?”

He looked puzzled. “No, miss. It’s John. John Bowley.” He nodded one last time and walked back to the auction area, singing once again.

“I think he’s on our side,” Dak said.

“But why didn’t he say anything?”

“Maybe he’s not sure about us.”

“At this point, I’m not sure about anything,” Sera said. “SQ posing as Quakers? Inviting runaways in and then capturing them, and selling them back to plantations? Keeping people working against their will and treating them like dirt? Why, Dak?”

“Think about it,” Dak said. “Plantation owners have a lot of land to farm — more than they can handle on their own. So they buy a slave and they get them for life, or however long they want them. They don’t have to pay wages day in and day out. When a slave runs away or gets set free, the plantation owner feels like they lost money. They have to buy another slave.”

Sera exploded. “They shouldn’t buy slaves at all! They should hire people and pay them! Not force them against their will!”

“I *know* that, Sera, but you asked for an explanation. I didn’t say it was right, and I don’t think it’s right. But if you’re wondering *why* plantation owners want to keep slaves from escaping or keep the government from freeing them, well, that’s why. Money.”

“So they don’t see it as immoral,” Sera said. “They see it as good business.”

Dak nodded. “And the SQ has chosen their side. Not exactly surprising, since there’s money *and* power at stake. They can’t resist the chance to keep people down. Who knows what would happen if slaves were able to escape and work with the abolitionists? But now, everyone is scattered. The Fugitive Slave Act is scaring people who might want to help runaways. Slaves get punished if they talk to anyone. ‘Without communication there can be no collaboration,’” he said, taking a quote often used by his father — although his father had used it when talking about household chores.

“So, putting it scientifically, you’re saying the effort can’t grow at a high enough rate of speed to produce the momentum necessary to change the country,” Sera mused, and then she squeezed his arm and said, “You’re really smart. That makes a lot of sense. You know, Dak, you can be so mature when you want to be.”

Dak raised an eyebrow. “Like a fine cheese, I get better with age.”

“And smellier,” added Sera.

Just then, the ominous voice of the auctioneer rose from the front of the courthouse once again. “Let the bidding begin!”



## The Bidding Begins

RIQ STOOD stone-faced and scared to death as a crowd of strangers stared at him, unsmiling, sizing him up. A handsome dark-skinned man in Quaker dress, with a hat pulled low over his eyes, was one of few black people in the crowd of what Riq assumed were plantation owners and slave traders. The man came up to peer at Riq and Kessiah.

The little boy, James, pointed at the man, but Kessiah shushed him, and he was quiet. The man looked solemnly at Kessiah for a long moment, and then smiled at the boy and winked, and then nodded as if he was satisfied. As he walked away, he began to hum to himself. The tune was familiar, and it didn't take Riq long to recognize the song that Kessiah had sung that morning along with women outside the window. *Run, mourner, run.*

Riq looked at Kessiah from the corner of his eye and watched as her entire body seemed to relax. She let out a light shuddering breath and inhaled deeply. She raised her head and faced the menacing-looking crowd with an air of confidence.

When the handlers took the shackles off for the bidding, the woman bent down, pretending to move the chain. Riq bent down, too, to help, since she held the infant tirelessly in one arm. "When things heat up, don't fight," she whispered. "Just run."

Riq's eyes opened up in alarm. "Where?"

"Get to the Choptank River and hide in the woods until dark. I can meet you there. But watch out — Bradshaw's Hotel is along the way."



Riq didn't know what Bradshaw's Hotel was, but it didn't sound good. "My friends won't know where I'm going," he whispered.

"Nothing I can do about that," Kessiah said, standing up. It wasn't unkind; it was just a fact.

Riq stood, too, and as he heard the auctioneer and saw his friends running toward the crowd, he wished either Dak or Sera knew sign language. All he could do was hope they didn't mess this up.



"This is insane," Sera muttered for the second time in a day. Hands popped up all around when the bidding began for Riq at twenty-five dollars. "How much money do you have?"

"Five hundred and sixty-three dollars and forty-six cents."

Sera gripped his arm. "Are you serious?"

"Sure. It's in my college fund at home."

Sera sighed. "I mean how much with you? I've got six dollars and twenty-five cents."

Dak shook his head. "Nada." He paused. "Hey! That's three languages."

"Still too soon, Dak."

"Roger that."

"So," Sera said after a minute, "I'm thinking we just watch to see who wins the auction, and follow that person home. Do you have any other ideas?"

"We could rush the stage, grab him, and warp out of here."

"Yeah, those enormous constables or handlers or whatever they're called won't mind. I'm sure they've never seen anybody try anything at a slave auction before."

"Maybe you could change the inflection in your voice just a little more when you say things like that, because I might miss the sarcasm," Dak said.

"Yeaaaaah, those *enooooormous* constables —"

"Quiet — I think the bidding is slowing down. And look, the beefy dudes are all bored looking — there's only one watching Riq." Dak looked at Sera.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yeah. Let's go."



Finally, only two bidders remained. And then one. The auctioneer slammed his hand down on his podium, making Riq jump. He looked out to the crowd to see who had bought him. Even though Kessiah had assured him something was going to happen, he didn't know what or when. Or if it even really included him. All he knew was that he was no longer free, and someone now owned him.

It was the worst feeling in the world. Even worse than the Remnants. And then he remembered how Kissy's story went.



## Escape

WITH KESSIAH now on the block, Riq's heart sank. As he recalled the story Grandma Phoebe had told him, great-great-great-great-grandmother Kissy, along with her children, had been auctioned. Her husband, who was free, tried to buy her freedom, but failed. They attempted escape, but failed at that, too. And Kissy never saw John again.

And now the man who little James had pointed at was bidding. Suddenly it all made sense, and Riq was the only one who knew it was going to fail.

Another near-nauseating Remnant shook Riq's existence — and his confidence. And he knew, now. He knew it for certain. His Remnants were not at all like Sera's Remnants. That's why he couldn't share descriptions with her back when they were with the Vikings in the year 911. When he'd told her they were nothing — he'd meant it literally. That's exactly what they were. A nothingness so black, cold, and void of any kind of love . . . there was nothing more *nothing* than that.

While Sera's Remnants were the ache of love between people, of a life that could have been, his were the helpless ache of suffocation, the shocking ache of a body plunged into ice water. The harsh ache of bone scraping bone.

And to Riq, after years of pondering the phenomenon, it could mean only one thing: He wasn't supposed to be here. He wasn't supposed to exist.

If he let things happen as they did, with John failing to rescue his family, with them never seeing one another again, then Kissy would

eventually start a new family — a family that would one day include Riq. But what if he intervened? Maybe he could keep John and Kissy together and ensure James grew up in freedom. Maybe he could help them find Aunt Minty, who was somehow sabotaged in her efforts to save them. Maybe that was exactly what he was supposed to do to fix the Break.

Even if it meant he would never be born.

Just then the auctioneer's hand slammed down once again and Kessiah was sold to John Bowley. Her husband. Just the way his grandmother had told him. There was a murmur in the crowd as people realized a freedman had just won a slave auction. This sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen, and the people were beginning to react.

Riq wasn't sure what would come next, but what he didn't expect to see was Dak and Sera, running toward him, holding out the Infinity Ring.

“Grab on!” Dak shouted.

Riq shook his head in disbelief. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't abandon this mission now. “No!” he cried. “Don't touch me!” He dodged around them and took off running. His shouting alerted the handlers, who turned their attention from the restless crowd back to Riq.



Dak and Sera stood speechless, caught completely off guard by Riq's reaction to their rescue attempt. They watched as he ran down the courthouse steps and the five guards gave pursuit. Kissy, meanwhile, wasted no time. She pushed her son into John Bowley's arms, then, cradling her baby to her chest, leapt off the steps and disappeared into the crowd.

“Come on!” Dak cried, taking off after the guards. “We can't lost sight of Riq!”

“I know!” Sera hollered back. “But it's hard to run in this muumu!”

“Just try and keep up!”

“Just try wearing a dress,” Sera said back at him, but not as loud. “Look!” she called. “He's circling around. We need to cut the big guys off so he can get away. This way!” She veered off toward the church/post office/whatever it was, and Dak doubled back and followed her. “You take the far one, I'll hit the close one, and with any luck —”

Dak waved his arm to shush her as Riq ran past. “Sanctuary!” Dak yelled to Riq when he went by, and then he crossed in front of one guard, tripping him, and tackled another. Sera jumped onto the back of a third,

whipped her shawl off her shoulders, and pulled it tight around the guard's neck. The other two guards hesitated, waiting for instructions from their fallen leader, which gave Riq just enough time to snake around an outbuilding and into the woods.

The guard Dak had tackled shoved Dak off of himself and started running again, while Sera's guard fell to his knees, gasping for air and slapping at Sera's legs. As soon as she could safely hop off, she did, leaving a nasty ropelike burn around the guard's neck as she pulled her shawl free. She gave him a final kick with her boot between his shoulder blades, grabbed Dak's hand to pull him to his feet, and then they headed in the opposite direction, so filled with fear and adrenaline that they didn't look back until they had made it all the way to the wooded lot behind the church. They stopped to catch their breaths, realizing that exactly nobody had followed them.

They high-fived behind a gorgeous sassafras tree, and then the accolades, complete with various accents, began.

"We're the Two Musketeers!"

"No, we're Inigo Montoya!"

"No, we're the Incredible-ests!"

"No, we're the Count!"

"Wait, what?"

"The Count!"

"The Count of what?"

"You know, that one guy. Who was really tough and vengeful and stuff."

"Oh. Um, no, I guess I don't know."

"They named a sandwich after him or something."

"You mean the Earl of Sandwich?"

"No, I'm quite sure it was a count. . . ."

"Well, in any case. We rock."

"We roll!"

They both looked around.

"But we still don't have Riq."

"Riq rolls!"

"Right."

There was a brief pause to account for waning enthusiasm.

Sera sighed. "I hope he knew what you meant when you yelled 'sanctuary.'"

"I meant 'church.' Who wouldn't know that?"

“Hopefully the guards wouldn’t, because I’m sure they heard, too,” Sera said.

“Oh. Well, yes. But they can’t get us if we’re in the church, though, can they? Isn’t that against the rules?”

“Only if it’s really a church and not a post office. And only if we’re in the movies.”

“That? Is next on the agenda to figure out.”

“You need to figure out if we’re in the movies? If so, we’re in a sorry state indeed.”

“No, the post-office-in-the-church part.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Shall we, then?”

“We shall.”

Sera slipped her hand in the crook of Dak’s elbow, which made him stand all stiff and weird, because he’d done that once before when he was the ring bearer at his aunt Tricia’s wedding and he had to escort some little crying girl down the aisle and throw the stupid flower petals for her because some strange wart-faced old woman hissed at him to do it at the last second. Dak shook his head in disgust, remembering. Parents really had no idea what psychological issues they caused, making their kids do such horrible things.

Anyway, Dak pulled his arm away, Sera shrugged and picked up her dress instead so it didn’t drag on the squishy, moist peat and wet grass, and they snuck in the back door of the church.



## Down by the River

RIQ FELT like he could run forever. It was a kamikaze mission, after all — what did he have to lose besides his own existence? His heart lifted as he zigzagged around the bumbling guards, loping along at a very comfortable pace for a guy who'd played halfback in soccer for the past seven years — not that his parents had ever taken the time to see him play. And while his broken nose throbbed, his focus was on leading the men farther and farther away from the river so he could lose them for good.

If only he could get word to the church, to Dak and Sera, that he wouldn't be making it there to meet them. Perhaps there was a way to do so — he wasn't sure. But he also remembered the clue, and he hoped that they would do what they'd all promised one another they'd do: complete the mission. Complete the mission. Complete the mission. It was more important than anything else in the universe. It was so important that it was absolutely, well, cataclysmic.

While he'd stood on that podium, Riq had deduced that the five burly men were probably SQ agents who didn't recognize him for what he really was — even though their job with the SQ required them to be on guard for the organization's enemies. Because they were too busy being blinded by his skin color, they failed to realize that he was a Hystorian. Well, Riq decided, perhaps he would just have to use that to his advantage.

Now, a good three miles into the woods, he led them on the chase in zigzag fashion. When they started to lag and he knew not only that he

could get away, but also that they wouldn't make it to the Choptank River anytime soon, he jumped into a small stream, stopped, and started running through it, back the way he'd come. His footprints in this damp soil would be too easy to track, but the water would fix that. So he jogged all the way downstream to where he could see the town again, from a different side this time. Once he got his bearings, he stepped onto the grass, pulled his hat down over his eyes, and tried to look like he was running errands. He kept his head down and didn't look anybody with light-colored skin in the eye.

He saw a bustling hotel from the back side and got past it without incident, and then continued on to the Choptank River. There were small ships and oyster boats all along the wharf, up to where the docks met the woods. Riq headed that way, unsure what to do next except hide until dark — this was as much information as Kessiah had been able to give him. But he definitely had to wait for her. He hadn't figured out all the pieces yet, but between the clues in the Square and the evidence of his own Remnants, it seemed Kissy and her family were caught up in the SQ's plot.

He told himself it all came down to the mission. But this time, it was personal. He absolutely had to see to the family's — his family's — safety. No matter what happened along the way — and no matter the consequences.





## The Postman Delivers

DAK AND Sera burst through the door of the church and looked around, expecting to see some sort of activity. But there was no one there at all. The afternoon sun streamed in, giving the church not only light but a bit of warmth as well.

“So, where’s the post office?” Dak asked.

Sera looked around. “And where’s Riq?”

“You know,” Dak mused, “isn’t it kind of illegal to have a post office in a church? Thomas Jefferson often spoke against the mingling of church affairs with those of the government, and the post office is a government institution.”

Sera shrugged, not really caring.

“Then again,” Dak continued, “Thomas Jefferson also said all men are created equal, and even put it in the Declaration of Independence. Yet he owned slaves. That doesn’t seem quite right either. There was this one English guy, an abolitionist back then, who said something like ‘there’s nothing more absurd than an important dude signing something saying everybody’s the same with one hand while holding a slave whip in the other hand.’”

Sera squinted at Dak. “English guy had a point.” She looked around the church. It was simple and sparse. “So,” she said, “if this is the post office, where’s the mail?” She began to look in earnest. “Maybe it’s hidden.”

Dak shot her a quizzical look, and then frowned to himself as if he were deep in thought. Then he said, “I wonder . . .” He didn’t continue

speaking. Instead he went up to the front of the church where the minister would stand, behind a wooden pulpit. He knelt down, feeling all around the base of it.

“What are you doing?” Sera called from the back of the church.

“Looking for mail. I think you might be on the right track. I just remembered something — slaves weren’t really allowed to talk to each other or gather together much when they were working. But they could go to church on Sunday, and that’s where —” Dak heard a noise, which echoed in the near-vacant building.

Sera whirled around. “Who’s there?” she said, trying to sound calm. She scrambled to her feet.

A man with a heavy beard rounded the corner into the sanctuary near Sera and stopped. “Oh, good afternoon,” he said. He held a package under his arm, which he deftly slipped inside his suit jacket.

“Hello,” Sera said, noting his swift move. She decided not to speak, knowing that if she didn’t offer any information about herself, that meant the man had to ask for it, which put her in a better position. Perhaps he’d offer information willingly. She tilted her head, as if she expected him to.

“I’m Gamaliel Bailey,” the man said. “Are you two lost? Looking for something, perhaps?”

“Why would you think we’re lost?” Sera demanded.

The man took a step back and held up his hands. “I apologize and meant nothing by the statement. Since this is a black church, it surprised me to see you two here. Has your nanny brought you here?”

Sera’s mouth opened. “No,” she said in an icy voice. “We don’t have a nanny, thank you. And you’re not black either,” she pointed out.

The man pursed his lips. “You must live nearby, then?”

“No,” Sera said.

“Yes,” Dak said at the same time.

The man struggled to hide a smile. “I see.”

“Are you the minister?” Dak asked. He glared at Sera, who glared back at him.

“Good heavens, no,” he said with a laugh. “I’m a physician-turned-newspaper-editor, I suppose. I run a little paper called the *National Era* in Washington, DC, and —”

“Wait a second — that’s where Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book was first published! It’s an abolitionist paper,” Dak said to Sera.

The man looked confused. “Which book?”

“*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” Dak said, triumphant that he finally got something right about this history. “Starting in 1851.”

Sera’s face froze, her eyes wide.

Dak froze, too.

Gamaliel Bailey’s lips parted and then closed again. His face grew thoughtful, and then a look of wonder passed over it. His eyes began to shine and he sniffed once, putting a loose fist to his mouth as if he were going to cough, but he didn’t cough, he just held it there for a long moment.

“I mean . . .” Dak said in a quiet voice, “it was probably a different paper in eighteen-Sasquach or something.”

A grin spread over Gamaliel’s face at that, and he dropped his fist from his mouth and clasped his fingers together. He stood, gazing at the children, his head shaking the slightest bit from side to side, as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Finally, he came to his senses.

“Welcome,” he said. “I never thought I’d see you. Never in a thousand years. And” — his eyes grew misty — “I can’t tell you how much we need you right now.” He pointed to a pew. “Do you have time to sit down and talk? I’m a Hystorian. This isn’t my post — I’m normally in Washington, DC, but there’s been a bit of trouble here lately, so I came down to help.”

Sera frowned. She was skeptical of everyone in this period. She crossed her arms. “How do we know you’re really a Hystorian? Prove it.”

The man didn’t look surprised at all by the question. It was as if he’d been waiting his whole life to answer it. He spoke in low tones. “In 336 BC, the most amazing visionary, Aristotle, foresaw that the world was headed toward a great danger. The true course of history was being broken, and he realized it would continue well after he was gone. But he also predicted that someday, people would be able to travel back in time and fix the Breaks in history. He established a secret group called the Hystorians to watch for the time travelers. I have been one for many years, as were my parents before me.”

Sera narrowed her eyes. “So, you’re friends with Mrs. Beeson,” she said. Not a question.

His eyes hardened. “Yes, Mrs. Beeson is a wonderful woman, and a steadfast abolitionist. She is, however, missing.” He dropped his gaze. “Many brave people along the Freedom Trail from here to Philadelphia are missing. My comrades and friends. That’s why I’ve come to help.” He wiped his face with his hand, holding it over his eyes for a moment.

“Everything we’ve worked for all these years is in jeopardy. My paper has been attacked, and I’m being violently forced out of business.” He looked at Dak. “As a matter of fact, Ms. Stowe wrote to me recently to inform me that she was hoping to provide a work of fiction for my paper. But the way things look now, there won’t be anything at all printed in the *National Era* in 1851, because it won’t exist.”

He pulled the package from his jacket pocket and tossed it to the seat next to him. “Letters,” he said. “Coded letters for the slaves from their free friends and family. Letters from stations on the Underground Railroad, and from conductors who are planning their next runs. We hide them here — it’s the only safe place for the slaves to get communication.” He looked up at Sera and Dak. “These letters and I nearly didn’t make it here today.”

Just then his face paled to ash and he cringed. He grabbed hold of the bench and held his breath, as if in pain.

“Are you all right?” Sera asked. She stood up and gave a helpless look around, unsure what to do.

The man shook his head and held up a hand. When he could speak, he said, “Don’t be afraid. I’ve been having some strange episodes lately — like flashes of memories, but memories of things I don’t quite remember. I know it doesn’t make sense. Perhaps in the future, there’s a cure for such things.” He looked up, hopeful, but when he saw the look on Sera’s face, the smile faded dead away.



## The Real Deal This Time

“I GUESS you could say we’re working on a cure,” Sera said. “They’re called Remnants.” She looked at her hands.

Dak nodded, even though he didn’t fully understand what they were talking about. He hadn’t ever experienced a Remnant, but he knew Sera and Riq both had them, as well as countless other people. And speaking of Riq . . . “Would you excuse us for a moment please, Dr. Bailey?”

“Of course.”

Dak pulled Sera down the aisle to the front of the church. “I just wanted to make sure you think he’s the real deal before I stick my stupid foot in my even stupider mouth again.”

Sera bumped the toe of his boot with the toe of hers. “What, 1851? It turned out fine,” she said. “You big dope.”

He grinned, feeling loads better now. “So, do we believe his story?”

“I think we do. Do we?”

“Yes. And maybe next time we’ll be smart enough not to believe every person who tells us they’re on our side.”

“We can’t be perfect every second of the day,” Sera said. “Okay. Let’s trust him.”

“And then,” Dak said, peering outside through the windows at the late afternoon sunset, “we really need to find Riq and that Gourdon guy.”

“Riq should be here by now,” Sera said. “Maybe he didn’t know the meaning of . . .” She trailed off with an embarrassed smile. “Oh, yeah. Linguist.”

“I thought it was too soon for linguist jokes.”

“Stop it. Let’s go.”

They returned to Gamaliel Bailey, and Dak spoke up. “So, if you’re sure you’re feeling all right, we need to start looking for our friend Riq, who is also a time traveler. He was captured last night by the imposter Mrs. Beeson, and sold as a slave today, which really messed up everything, even though he escaped. I’m sure fake Mrs. Beeson is not as lovely as the real one.”

“Oh, dear, that’s terrible,” Gamaliel said, standing up and wringing his hands. “I’m here to help you, though, and I will do everything I can.”

“We also need to wait here for a bit, then find and follow some drinking guy named Gourdon. Any chance you know him?”

“Gourdon? I know of no such man, I fear, but you’ll remember I’m not from here. You’re to follow him, you say?”

“Yes, but we also need to find Riq.” Dak was beginning to get anxious. “I hope he hasn’t been captured again.”

Gamaliel Bailey lifted a finger as if to speak, then held the pose for a moment, a puzzled look on his face. “Forgive me, children — I’m replaying our conversation in my mind — did you say you were to follow a drinking man named Gourdon?”

Sera raised an eyebrow at Dak, then turned back to the man. “Yes,” she said.

“*Hmm*. Can you tell me your instructions exactly?”

Sera tapped her finger against her thigh as she rattled off, “Seek not lantern or Friends. After tomorrow’s fair, visit post office. Wait, then follow the drinking Gourdon.”

Gamaliel almost smiled, but he still had a puzzled look on his face. “Was it in clue form?”

“Yes, it was set up like a telegram sent from Gourdon.”

The man chuckled, and then his laugh grew louder and louder. “Oh,” he said. “Oh, my. I surely needed that today. Gourdon, indeed.”

Sera and Dak looked at each other as if poor Gamaliel had lost his marbles.

“Children, it’s not a man you seek. It’s a constellation. I’m sure signing the telegram with the word *gourd* would have been too obvious, so I imagine your guide was being clever. Can you guess which constellation looks a bit like a drinking gourd?”

Dak knew astronomy was Sera’s weakest science. And he didn’t have a clue what a drinking gourd looked like, so he was no help.

When neither answered, Gamaliel said, “A drinking gourd is the hollowed-out bottom half of a gourd, which is sometimes used as a cup. Attached to the gourd is a stick, several inches long, so that if you leave the gourd in a pail of drinking water, the handle sticks out above the surface so you can grab hold, or use it as a *dipper*.” He emphasized the last word.

“*Ooh*, I get it,” Sera said. “This is an easy one. The Drinking Gourd is the Big Dipper.”

“And the Big Dipper points the way to . . . ?”

“The North Star,” Dak said.

“Your clue said to wait,” Gamaliel said. “Probably until the stars come out.”

“And then we follow the Drinking Gourd . . . but where?” Sera said. She didn’t like dealing with such vague instructions.

“Sera,” Dak said in a very serious voice, “Dr. Bailey said abolitionists are missing from here to Philadelphia. We saw for ourselves that the SQ is responsible. So we need to go north. We’ll follow the Freedom Trail, flush out the phony abolitionists, and find the *real* abolitionists so that they can continue to help runaways and work toward freedom and equality.”

Gamaliel stood, hat in hand. “As it stands now, the plantation owners are winning against us abolitionists. They’re using more and more violent means to stop us. My newspaper has been threatened, and so has my life. I will fight to the end to keep my paper going, but I’m afraid if they get rid of me, no one else will dare to step in. It’s very dangerous.” He turned to Dak. “Your mention of something I’ll publish in the new year gives me great hope that I’ll survive at least a bit longer. But who knows what will happen after that?” And then he paused and frowned. “Well, I guess you do.”

“A war,” Sera whispered. “That’s what happens. And it lasts forever.”

Gamaliel looked as though he didn’t dare ask if *forever* was an exaggeration.

Dak sucked in a breath and blew it out. Things were getting intense. “Well, if we don’t have to stay here to wait for the drunk dude,” he said, laughing a little, because now it sounded really ridiculous, “somebody should go find Riq.”

“I’ll do it,” Sera said. “You stay here in case he comes after all. He had the clue, too, remember? He figured it out, so I bet if he’s not

captured again, he'll know that we've all got to follow the Drinking Gourd." She looked around the church for a clock, with no luck. "Don't go anywhere," she said. "I'll be back a little after dark whether I've found him or not. And then we'll figure out what to do next."

With that, she was gone. A moment later, Dak and Gamaliel saw her bonneted head bobbing up and down as she ran down the street, clutching the shawl around her neck in one hand and holding Riq's coat in the other.

"She's a spunky girl," the man said.

"All the girls are like that in our time." Dak grimaced.

Gamaliel smiled warmly. "Good. There's hope, then, for all. That gives me more joy than you know."

When Sera had disappeared from sight, Dak turned back to the Hystorian. "How do we follow the Drinking Gourd, exactly? The sky is so vast. Are there trails, or do you just sort of . . . go north?"

"The way to freedom here along the coast," Gamaliel said, "is to go to the water, but there are no set trails. Most runaways have to make it out on their wits alone, or with a bit of help from other slaves or freedmen, and the occasional pale-skinned abolitionist who has no qualms about breaking the law. But we're lucky here — the Choptank River is just a few blocks away. It feeds into the Chesapeake Bay. Until about a week ago or so, runaway slaves were sometimes able to escape with a sympathetic sailor and get as far as Baltimore, at least."

"But not now?"

"Not now. Not safely, anyway. With all of the SQ posing as kind, good-hearted abolitionists, luring runaways into their homes and ships to capture and sell them again, there's no way to know whom to trust. It's chaos. We desperately need to get our Hystorians back and restore the system, or else no one will ever hear of the Underground Railroad." His face was solemn.

Dak didn't have the heart to tell him that in their time, no one but the geekiest historians had ever heard of it, and they knew it as a failure.





## Finding Riq

SERA RAN from one end of town to the other, which took almost no time at all in a town that didn't even have a post office. She poked her head inside a tavern, wrinkled up her nose, and backed out again. Riq wouldn't be in there. She slipped into Bradshaw's Hotel, where a group of men stood in a circle talking about buying and selling slaves and how much money they were making these days thanks to the Fugitive Slave Act, which they called the Bloodhound Law.

She wandered past them and stood nearby with her back to them, pretending to wait for someone, and they took no notice of her at all. She saw the fake Mrs. Beeson slip into the hotel, and that was enough to make Sera circle the group and exit in a hurry. She didn't see Riq anywhere, so reluctantly she left and turned toward the Choptank River wharf.

Since it was December, she was surprised to see so much activity by the water. The air was brisk. Sera pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders and scanned the various boats as daylight disappeared. She was getting anxious. She decided that Riq wouldn't be milling around on the road after what had happened earlier, so she took a very long walk in a roundabout way along the river behind the village shops, following a small stream into the edge of the woods on her way back toward the church. And that's where she spied a young man sitting with his back against a tree.

She moved closer. "Riq?"

He scrambled to his feet and whirled around. "Sera," he said. "Wow. You scared me. I'm so glad to see you."

She ran up to him. “Why didn’t you come to the church? Didn’t you hear Dak?”

“I heard him. But I couldn’t. I can’t. There are slave traders *everywhere*. I couldn’t risk crossing the street after what happened earlier — everybody knows what I look like.”

“Well, it’s getting dark now. Can you come with me? We’ll sneak across.”

He sighed deeply. “It’s not just the risk,” he admitted. “It’s . . . well, I’m supposed to meet Kessiah here. See, I found out a bunch of stuff. She’s related to me, and . . .”

Sera stared. “She’s what?”

“She’s my great-great-something-grandmother. I know it’s crazy, but I’m telling you, being up on that platform was like *déjà vu* — I’d heard the story of that auction so many times from my grandma Phoebe. . . . I didn’t even realize. It was just so strange and awful, but somehow it was amazing because she’s, you know, my family.”

Sera gazed up at him, wishing she really did understand. “Does she know that?”

“No. But I know something’s weird, and I know from my grandma that something bad happens, and I think it all has to do with the Break. I need to stay with Kessiah. I need to make sure she stays safe. It —” He hesitated, then said in a very quiet voice, “It has something to do with my Remnants, Sera.” He left it at that, and Sera knew better than to press him for more details. “We’re bound for Baltimore. And that’s the same way you guys have to go, too, according to the clue — you got the Drinking Gourd reference, right?”

“Um,” Sera said in a breezy manner, “oh yeah, sure, right away. Easy one. Yep.”

He grinned. “I knew you’d get it eventually. Did you find the Hystorian? The real one, I mean?”

“We found *a* Hystorian, yes. He’s very nice.”

“Good.” He dug the toe of his boot in the mud, thinking. “Okay, then. Here’s my plan. I’m going with Kissy and John tonight — she’s a runaway, and he’s a fugitive for taking them, so we’re all on the run — and I’m going to keep them safe until we meet Aunt Minty in Baltimore. She’s supposed to take them farther north, but something goes wrong along the way. Something I may be able to help with. So,” he said, “I will meet you guys in Baltimore, and we’ll figure out a plan from there.” He waited, not breathing, for her response.

Her face wrinkled up. “But, Riq,” she said, “no. Just . . . no. We need you, and I hate when we’re all split up. It makes me really nervous. How far is Baltimore from here?”

“It’s north, up the Chesapeake Bay, like seventy-five miles. You guys can take land, and I’ll take the water where it’s safer. Okay? Please?” He jiggled his foot with nervous energy.

She looked skeptical.

Riq sighed. “Remember when we were in the 885 Break and Dak was desperate to experience a Viking ship because he’s so in love with history and it was the chance of a lifetime, and so we said fine, go ahead? This is like that. This is my Viking ship.” He grabbed her hand and looked into her eyes. “Please, Sera.”

She flushed in the dark and looked down. “Yeah, okay, I get that, but look at the trouble Dak made because of his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He could have died. Or one of us, trying to rescue him.”

“Yes, but there’s no war here!” He bit his lip, knowing he was too loud, and lowered his voice. “There’s no war, no projectile missiles or boiling oil raining down. It’s just a simple overnight ride up the bay.” His eyes begged her as the stars began to pop in the night sky.

“Why can’t you wait for me to get Dak and the Hystorian so we can all go together?”

“We’re too big a group. The only way this will work is if we can avoid drawing attention. And besides, you two need to focus on the mission. Keeping Kissy safe is just one part of that.”

“*Grrr*,” Sera said. It was getting late. She had to get back to the church.

They heard a noise and tensed, on their guard, but it was Kessiah and John and the children. James, in his father’s arms, clutched a blanket.

“Riq,” Kessiah whispered. “It’s time. We have to go.” She nodded to Sera. “Thank you for causing that distraction,” she said. “We’ll always be grateful.” Her eyes traveled downward to Riq’s and Sera’s hands clasped together, and her mouth opened, then closed again. But then she controlled her expression and turned back to Riq. In a more sympathetic voice, she said, “I’m sorry. We need to make it to Federal Hill by late morning. If we’re not there in time . . .” She didn’t finish the sentence, but everyone knew what she meant.

Riq turned back to Sera. “Please.”

Sera looked from Kessiah to John to Riq, closed her eyes, leaned back against the tree, and sighed. Kessiah and John both nodded their

good-byes to Sera and turned to go.

Sera pulled her hand from Riq's and picked up the Quaker jacket, holding it out to him. "Here," she said. "Go. Stay safe, all of you. I don't know how long it'll take us to get there. . . ." She trailed off, hoping Gamaliel would know.

Riq took the jacket and surprised Sera by grabbing her in a tight bear hug, and whispered, "Thanks," in her ear. Then he added, "Federal Hill in Baltimore. I'll see you there tomorrow." He turned, taking a few steps to follow John and Kessiah. Then he paused and ran back to Sera, gripped her forearms, and looked wildly around. "If something happens and we don't make it, or I don't make it, you know what you have to do. Promise me?"

Sera's lip quivered. "Nothing will happen to you." She stared at him, his gaze unwavering, waiting.

"If it does," he said urgently.

Finally, she nodded. "I promise," she whispered.

He turned and was gone into the night.



## When Goons Attack

KESSIAH, CARRYING baby Araminta; John, walking with young James; and Riq picked their way in the dark along the small stream until it met the impressive Choptank River. John led them through the dark behind an oyster-shucking house, through a maze of giant piles of oyster shells, sneaking around them rather than taking the more populated walk along the wharf. Riq could smell the salty brine. There was a brisk breeze, but the stars were bright and there wasn't a cloud in the sky that he could see.

"We can watch from here," John said, crouching down. He glanced at Riq, sizing him up. "We're waiting for an oyster boat. It's small, but I pray we all fit."

Riq knew who'd be left out if they didn't.

"With this wind," Kessiah said, "we'll make good time, won't we?"

"If it lasts." John, who worked as a ship's carpenter, held a finger to his lips as three hulking men came into view across the wharf. They wandered through the piles of shells as if they were looking for something.

A moment later, as a small oyster boat under sail glided toward the dock, the three men split up and began to circle the area twenty yards away.

John signaled to the crew in the boat, and one of them signaled back. Riq watched, waiting for his cue. He smiled at James, who somehow understood the seriousness of all of this and was quiet. But the baby . . .

Kessiah cradled the baby to her, but she began to fuss and cry. John's eyes widened in alarm. He turned his head toward the three men getting

closer, and then he looked at Riq and Kessiah. They had to go — it was now or never. They'd have to risk being seen. "Be quick," he said. "You and the baby, then James and I will follow. Riq, you come after me."

Riq and Kessiah nodded. She gripped a small bag and the baby, and ran to the boat. The men in the boat helped her in, and then John began to run with young James, and that's when one of the three enormous men saw the movement.

"Stop!" the man hollered. "Who are you?" He came running, the other two on his heels.

"Go!" Riq yelled. He got up, ready to run but waiting, knowing he couldn't go until James and John were settled to make sure the boat didn't capsize.

The wind gusted, taking James's blanket with it.

"Hey!" James yelled. He turned to get it, pulling from his father's grasp just as they were about to step into the vessel. John, thrown off balance, nearly fell into the icy water, and instead twisted and fell hard on his back on the edge of the boat, managing to roll into it rather than into the water. He cried out, clutching his back, and writhed in pain. He was completely unable to go after James.

The slave hunters thundered toward the boat and the boy.

"James!" Riq cried, his stomach lurching. He tore after him, scooped up the blanket and James in one smooth move, and then whirled around, three angry men bearing down on him.

Kessiah screamed, baby Araminta wailed, John gasped and groaned, the stranger piloting the boat whipped his head around and yelled "Go!" and Riq — carrying James — tried desperately to dodge the men and make it into the boat, whispering, "Hang on to me!" into James's neck. But despite Kessiah's screams, the captain of the vessel pulled away for his own escape, and there was nowhere for Riq and James to go but into the frigid river, or back into the woods.



## The Journey Begins

“THE GOOD news,” Gamaliel said as he, Dak, and Sera made their way toward the river, “is that I have transportation awaiting to cross me back over to the other side of the Chesapeake, for I traveled to Annapolis by buggy, then here by boat. And there is room enough on the cutter for all of us.”

“What’s the bad news?” Sera asked, a hint of worry creeping into her voice, partly because she could hear a woman screaming in the distance, which seemed odd for such a small town. She couldn’t help being on edge. Dak had been surprised that Sera had let Riq out of her sight once she’d found him, but he’d been quick to declare that she’d made the right decision. Dak figured that Riq knew what he was doing. Sera herself was less sure.

“The bad news is that we must go by way of Annapolis. But we’ll get that far tonight and take the buggy the rest of the way. We’ll reach Baltimore in the morning.”

“That’s not so bad,” Sera said.

“There’s even worse news, though,” Dak said, turning and glancing over his shoulder. “I just saw our non-Friend, Mrs. Beeson, in front of the hotel, and I’m guessing she saw us, too, because now we’re being followed. Gammy, do you know those two guys?”

Gamaliel looked over his shoulder, and then began to walk faster. “Not by name,” he said in a grim voice. “Time Wardens working as slave traders. They’re not fond of me, or my newspaper. I thought I’d managed

to lose them on this trip.” He waved to catch the attention of someone by the river.

The three hurried to the wharf, Gamaliel directing Dak and Sera to a pilot cutter. “No time to waste now,” Gamaliel said under his breath. He held out his hand to Sera, who didn’t really need help climbing aboard but thought it would be impolite to say so, and then Dak, who ignored the hand and jumped in on his own. They were getting to be decent sailors themselves by now.

Gamaliel climbed aboard after them. “Go below and stay out of sight,” he said to Dak and Sera. “I think we lost them, but best we take precautions.” He strode across the deck to speak to the captain.

From their hiding place in the little cabin that led below, Dak and Sera could hear various scuffles and shouting from around the wharf, which seemed to be quite natural as far as wharves go at night, but they still strained to scan the area for the Time Wardens. It was too dark to see much. The only lights were those of oil lamps on the boats and the stars above.

“I wish it was light out,” Dak said. He watched the sailors go to work and started explaining to Sera everything he knew about piloting vessels and how their job was to help guide the bigger ships into port. A pilot cutter was kind of like a tugboat, but about a trillion times cooler because it had a mast and could go superfast. Sera nodded now and then, not all that interested. She got up and stood in the doorway of the little cabin as the cutter headed down the river toward the Chesapeake Bay.

“There it is,” she said. “The Big Dipper, pointing out the North Star. We’re following it. Well, sort of, now that we’re turning north.” She felt the sharp cut of the wind whipping around her bonnet and slapping her in the face with spray. A Remnant blew through her as well, making her long for her parents. It was crazy, really. She didn’t remember them at all, yet she felt such love for them, such intense desire to be with them as if she knew them well.

“I bet you miss your parents,” she said to Dak.

He got up and stood behind her, looking out over her shoulder. “Yeah, I do. A lot. I know I make a lot of stupid jokes, but the truth is, I can’t stop worrying about them.” He took a deep breath and blew it out. “I’ve been on this very same body of water before with them,” he said. “We stayed here on vacation once when we went to Washington, DC, to see the War of 1812 Memorial. We went sailing. It was the best time —” He stopped abruptly and didn’t continue. He slipped his hand into his



pocket and fingered the iron key his mother had slipped to him when he'd seen his parents for a moment in 911.

Sera grimaced. "We'll see them again. We'll figure it out. We have to."

"At least they're alive."

Sera put on a brave smile. "Right. Exactly. At least you know that much." She swallowed hard and told herself her watery eyes were from the wind.

"I sure hope Riq's okay," Dak said. "He's not going to be safe anywhere during this entire Break. At least when I was on the Viking ship I didn't look like a slave." He drew the heel of his boot along the crack in the planked flooring. "This whole time period really stinks, you know? I just never thought about it like this before. I wish we could fix it all." He held up his hand before Sera could butt in. "I know, I know. We can't. We can only, you know, remove the boulder in the river so the stream flows the way it's supposed to. Or whatever mumbo jumbo poetry you turned the explanation into the other day."

"For the love of mincemeat," Sera muttered. "You know how to ruin a moment, don't you?" She ventured out of the cabin and peered around at the sailors working all around. "I think it's probably safe to wander," she said. "Nobody's going to stow away now."

Just then, a beeping sound came from one of Dak's pockets.

"Is that the SQuare?" asked Sera.

"Um . . .," said Dak. He dug around in his coat until he finally produced a small electronic device. "I guess my battery is dying."

Sera couldn't believe her eyes. "You've had your cell phone with you this entire time?" she hissed.

Dak looked bashful. "I thought it might come in handy eventually. Like, what if my parents tried to call? But so far we haven't been anywhere with reception."

"Gee, I can't believe you couldn't get a signal in 885 when you'd been abducted by Vikings. That would have been handy." She took the phone from him. "Although, I might be able to use it for spare parts."

"Don't you dare!" Dak said.

They heard footsteps and looked up to see Gamaliel approaching. Sera shoved the phone in her pocket. "How are you two?" he asked. "I wish I could show you the beautiful forest landscape here, but alas, it's all covered by darkness." He smiled. "I know you're worried, but take heart.

Annapolis isn't far. Captain Grunder said we're making excellent time. The wind is with us."

"And so are we," came a menacing voice from behind them. Gamaliel and the kids whirled around. The faces of the two Time Wardens loomed out of the darkness. "It seems you have a debt to pay. Our friend Mary sold a slave this morning. Either pay the money or produce the slave. Now." The man sneered. "Or you might not live to see the future again, time travelers."



## Lost and Alone

EVERYTHING FELT like a nightmare in slow motion. Riq saw it all, from John slipping and crashing into the oyster boat and unable to move, to Kessiah, holding the baby and helpless to act, to the boat's captain, not willing or able to risk jail and a huge fine for helping a fugitive. Riq rushed to the edge of the water to see if he could toss the boy safely into the boat, but the wind caught the sail, pulling it away quickly, and there was no one on board who could catch him. He couldn't risk it — what if he missed and James plunged into the dark sea? Riq could only hold the little boy tightly and turn to face the threat of three slave traders rushing at him at once.

“Stop right there,” Riq growled, trying to sound tough. “I'm here with a whole squad of Hystorians. We know what you SQ are up to.”

The men looked puzzled. “What's an SQ?” one said. “Did he just call us a curse word?”

Riq didn't know whether he should be relieved or disappointed. He'd thought he was up against three sinister SQ agents. But they were only a bunch of jerks.

He yelled out to Kessiah, “We'll meet you there!” He hoped fiercely that she heard him —and trusted him. If she risked coming back, she might be captured for good.

He zigzagged around the oyster piles and began doing soccer drills, stopping and turning just when the men thought they knew where he would be next. Ultimately, he decided his best option would be to head back into the woods, which he did.

It was definitely harder to run with the extra forty pounds on his back after very little food and water all day, but the running helped poor little James forget about the traumatic scene he'd just witnessed. With the promise that he'd see his parents again soon, he began enjoying himself, laughing whenever Riq changed directions. "You're my horse!" he cried, and Riq was actually sad he had to shush the boy.

As he headed into the woods he went on his now familiar route, but when he caught a glimpse of the sky, he remembered the clue. With the men following him closely, he plunged farther into the dark woods, following the Drinking Gourd, in hopes he would eventually reach another port. The three money-hungry slave handlers stayed on his trail, wanting their cut of the sale that never went through. They may not have been with the SQ, but they were villains all the same.



After an hour, Riq was near exhaustion, James was tired of being jostled, and the slave handlers had fallen far behind. Riq's energy petered out, and then, to his chagrin, so did the land. He came to a point of land that was like the top of a rounded triangle, surrounded by water on two sides with the threat of slave catchers on the third. He could go no farther north. As the moon rose, and with the clearing over the water, he could finally see that he was stranded, stuck on the wrong side of the Choptank River where it led into the Chesapeake Bay. His only options were to turn back into the arms of the slavers or to try to hitch a ride from a passing boat, not knowing who, if anyone, out there could be trusted.

Maybe it was because someone else's life depended on him, and maybe because the horrors of the day had finally caught up with him, and maybe it was the constant ache in his head — all the running wasn't helping his broken nose feel better — but for the first time ever, Riq felt like being a Hystorian was truly going to be the end of him.

"I want to get down. Where's my mama?" James asked.

"We're going to meet her in Baltimore."

"Where's Balto-more?"

Riq looked out over the water. "Oh, it's just on the other side of the water, up that way a bit," he said. He smiled, trying to reassure the boy. "We're just going to rest here for a little while."

He could see boats going by now and then: steamboats, canoes of various sizes — some even with sails — tugboats, and oyster boats like

the one Kessiah and John were in. He strained his eyes on the off chance that they were there, looking for them, but he knew better. It was a huge river, and they'd be long gone by now. Riq doubted he and James had traveled more than a few miles, which accounted for a pretty short distance of the coastline.

"Now," he muttered. "Do we hide, or do we try to flag someone down?" He looked around the small clearing on the bank. There was a dead tree and some long grasses that were completely flattened, probably by the nor'easter that came through . . . but it seemed strange that the grass wasn't flat everywhere.

Then Riq heard a sound that emptied his head of all other thoughts. Howling, in the distance. He remembered what Kissy had said about being hunted. About the Bloodhound Law.

*Bloodhounds*, he thought. *They're using dogs to track us.* And there was no way he could outrun a dog.

He looked around, panicked, worried that the men would come crashing into the clearing, and thinking that if they did, he'd have nowhere to go. He glanced up into the trees, wondering if they could climb one to hide. And then something caught his eye. Something, or someone, was already in the trees.



## Smooth Sailing

RIQ LOOKED again to make sure he wasn't just seeing a shadow. "Is someone up there?" he called softly. "Stay here," he said to James, setting him on the ground. He ran to the tree and looked up.

There in the branches were two crouched bodies, holding tightly to a small birch-bark canoe. Riq's heart pounded. In the distance a dog howled. "Three slave handlers are chasing us," he whispered to them. "Please . . . can you help us?"

The two young men looked at each other, but they didn't say anything.

"Please," Riq pleaded. "We don't have anywhere else to go. We're trapped. I can give you" — he looked around, realizing that even though he had a little money in his wallet, they might question a five-dollar bill with a picture of George McClellan on it many years before the man became president — "I'll give you my coat," he said. "Please."

The two spoke in soft tones for a moment, and then one hopped to the ground. The other balanced the canoe on a branch and then slowly pushed it so that it tipped down. The one on the ground reached for the point. Riq helped grab it and bring the canoe safely down. "Thank you," he whispered. The other dropped to the ground, and wordlessly the three carried the canoe to the water.

"Come on, James," Riq said. His lungs swelled with the brisk air and the hope that they weren't doomed after all, and this time James and his blanket made it safely into the canoe. There were no seats, only a few

crossbars, so Riq deposited the boy on the floor, then he helped push off from the bank and jumped inside.

Riq climbed to the front of the canoe to sit with James and grabbed a paddle. He was glad he didn't have to steer and just happy to use his arms for once instead of running. The water parted before them. Within minutes the peaceful waves lulled young James to sleep.

When they were out in the open water with no one nearby, Riq shifted, easing his body around to face the others without tipping them, and began rowing backward now. "Thank you," he said quietly to the two, knowing his voice would travel over the water. "I'm Riq, this is James." He set his paddle down and started taking off his coat as promised.

"It's all right. Keep it. You're going to need that," said the young man in the middle. His voice was suspiciously high-pitched.

Riq raised an eyebrow and the young man in the middle took off his hat, revealing that he was actually a she. "My name is Anna. This is my husband, Ben." She shifted her position. "We left from Norfolk but had to stop and take shelter when the nor'easter hit — it was too much for this little thing. We were stuck up in that tree for two days. Once the weather cleared this morning, we've been waiting for dark. We were just about to set off again when we heard you all crashing through the woods like a herd of cows."

Riq smiled. "I was getting pretty tired by the end. Thank you again for allowing us to join you. I don't know what we would have done. Where are you headed?"

The woman glanced back at her husband and he shrugged. "North," he said. "But the canoe only takes us to the port where the tall houses meet the water. When we get there, we have to leave it at the wharf with a schooner called *Chariot* — the word looks like this." Ben put his paddle down and pulled something from his pocket. He held out a wrinkled piece of paper with the word spelled out. "The captain will deliver the canoe back to Norfolk for the next folks. He's a good man."

"Clearly," Riq said, awe in his voice.

"Our friends turned back because of the storm or there'd be no room for you," Anna said.

Riq nodded. "I'm feeling very lucky right about now," he said.

"We're not there yet," Ben said.

They paddled in silence through the night, the moon lighting their way. Once they had the west bank of the Chesapeake Bay in view, they

traveled north, following the star, on the lookout for a large deepwater naval port where the three- and four-story houses sprang up from the water.

As Riq's anxiety quelled and the rhythmic paddling calmed his mind, he looked down at James, who was curled in a ball at his feet. *Poor Kessiah*, he thought. *She must be really upset wondering where her little boy could be.* Riq stopped paddling to shed his coat, tucking it around the sleeping boy's body. It reminded him of something a mom or dad would do — or a grandma, in his case. His parents never seemed to have time to think about Riq much at all.

Absently, Riq ran his hand over the boy's head, feeling the prickle of a recent haircut. James's ear was cold, and Riq adjusted the coat to cover it. He found himself wondering if he'd ever find Kessiah. And if he didn't, or if something unthinkable happened to her . . .

"We'll find your mom," Riq said softly, and then he looked up, embarrassed. But the married couple hadn't heard — they continued rowing tirelessly.

Riq returned his paddle to the water as emotions tugged at him from all directions, threatening to strangle him. Because here he was, a Hystorian above all else, just like his parents. Noble. Brave. Always, *always* fighting and sacrificing to do what was best for the Hystorian quest. It was the only thing Riq knew how to do. It was in his blood! It was his destiny. Yet, right here in front of him, in a little heap at his feet, was one individual, one helpless child, whose life depended on Riq.

Riq didn't know what dangers and challenges awaited him in the hours and days ahead as he worked to fix this Break. But suddenly it felt like it didn't matter as much. Because here was this boy who desperately needed Riq. And on the other side of the water was a mother who was counting on him.

Riq's objective had shifted. And while there was still no doubt he would sacrifice *himself* for the Hystorians, he knew that he would not — could not — sacrifice this boy's safety for the good of the world.

He frowned at the water. Had his parents ever made a choice like this?



It was nearly dawn when they found the port exactly as described. "Annapolis Harbor," Riq said. "The capital." His hands were cold and his



body ached. They glided through the marina, looking for the *Chariot*, making sure the coast was clear. When they located the schooner and all seemed well, they drew up alongside the dock. Riq climbed out, slipped on his coat, and lifted the sleeping James from the canoe. He held the boy close, wrapping the jacket around him. Ben and Anna got out, too, and pulled the craft out of the water, leaving it on the dock next to the larger vessel.

With a handshake all around, they decided to go their separate ways, knowing that traveling together would only arouse more suspicion. But everyone hoped the cover of a larger city with a larger population of free blacks would allow them to blend in.

As Ben and Anna turned to go, Riq hesitated and then stopped them. “By the way,” he said, “there’s been some trouble in the safe houses. I was captured from one by someone posing as a Quaker.” He looked at the ground, not wanting to give himself away, but wanting to protect his new friends. “If you can avoid the safe houses, you should.”

Anna looked grateful. “Thank you,” she said.

Ben smiled. “It is a sad thing, not knowing who to trust. But I’m glad we trusted you. You have made our burdens somewhat lighter this night.”

“I feel the same way — trust me on that, too.” Riq pressed his lips together, gave them a firm nod and a final thank-you, and turned with James to walk along the river, leaving the couple in the shadow of the *Chariot*.

Riq grew fearful that if he didn’t get some sleep and some food soon, he might collapse. Had it really been less than twenty-four hours since he ate fish and corn bread at the plantation? He carried the boy along the Severn River, past the Naval shipyard, to a road called King George Street that bridged the river. A sign pointed out the most amazing news of the mission so far for Riq: BALTIMORE, 25 MILES.

“Twenty-five miles,” he mused. In the twenty-first century, it would take a half hour. Now? It might take all day if he had to walk. “Not fast enough,” he said under his breath. “We need to get there before something happens to your mama.”

James was still asleep so he didn’t answer.

Riq shivered in the cold and decided the only way to wake up was to keep walking. Nobody was about to offer them a ride. He thought about hiking through the woods, but he’d had enough of that in the dark — his body had been poked and scratched by enough sticks already. His feet

were sore and he could feel blisters forming. He wasn't going to go off-road until it was totally necessary. Maybe he wasn't thinking right because of lack of food and sleep, but he was about at the end of his wits. He started to jog and tried to look at the bright side. At least carrying a forty-pound kid around would add some muscle to Riq's body. He should be in pretty great shape by the time they all returned home. . . .

Assuming, of course, he still had a home once they got through this. He cradled James's head on his shoulder and kept jogging toward Baltimore.



They'd gone a short distance when they came upon a stagecoach in front of a building. Riq's curiosity was piqued when he saw the side of the wagon. U.S. MAIL, it said. He stopped, stepping off to the side of the road and into the shadows of the trees, and watched as a man came out rolling a wooden cart that held a stack of crates. He loaded them into the wagon.

When he returned the wooden cart to the building, Riq heard the man shout his thanks to the ones working inside. "Baltimore. Back by noon. Have the next load waiting," he said. He walked back to the stagecoach, and as soon as he was out of sight, Riq made his move. He snuck up to the back of the wagon, set James inside, then, as the horses began to move, he climbed aboard and hid. Within five minutes, he had fallen fast asleep.



## A Juggling Match

THE TWO men shoved Gamaliel to the ground of the cabin. Dak saw Sera's hand go to her belt to protect the Infinity Ring. They both took a few steps backward, but there was nowhere to go — and the men bearing down on them weren't after Gamaliel, they were after them!

"Time travelers? What are you talking about? And we don't owe you a cent!" Dak said, trying his hardest to sound innocent while staring at what looked to be a saber, circa 1840, the point of which was approximately four inches from his nose. Was it wrong that he wanted to get an even closer look? Because if that was wrong, Dak didn't want to be right.

"Whatcha hiding around your waist, little girl? Hake, grab her and take a look."

"Sure thing, Stuckey."

"Don't touch them," Gamaliel said with a growl.

"Shut him up first," Stuckey said.

Hake followed the order by slamming Gamaliel Bailey up against the wall, shoving a handkerchief in his mouth, and then spinning the man around. He started wrapping a rope around Gamaliel's wrists.

"There sure is a lot of rope around here," Dak muttered. "You could make a whole lotta shoestrings with that. Whole lotta *shoestrings*."

Sera's brows knit together. She glanced down at her feet. "Yes, yes you could. At least one, two, maybe *three!*" she cried. Both Dak and Sera kicked out at once, Dak making contact with Stuckey's hand so that he yanked it up and away and the saber stuck in the ceiling, and Sera aiming

high to connect with the man's chest, sending Stuckey reeling into Hake, whose head smashed into the wall. Sera dove between his legs and scrambled out the door while Dak grabbed the saber and pulled it out of the ceiling. He dodged around Stuckey's outstretched leg, and pounded the Time Warden's thigh with the butt of the saber as he went past, hoping to give the man a wicked charley horse.

They dashed out of the cabin and tore through the cutter, startling the ship hands. "There are two men after us! They've got Dr. Bailey held hostage up in the cabin!" Dak shoved the saber at one of the sailors, who took it gratefully and ran to go abaft.

Just then, Stuckey came pounding out of the cabin. Sera shrieked and ran aft, but there was not much she could do other than continue to run around the deck. Dak tried to tackle the Time Warden, but it was like trying to tackle one of the pillars on the White House. He bounced right off and fell to the deck, breathless.

Stuckey chased after Sera, who tripped on the hem of her dress and fell sprawling. "Oof!" she said. She scrambled to her feet again, her knees and palms stinging like crazy, and then before she could pick up speed, Stuckey caught her by the shawl and yanked. The shawl clotheslined Sera and then came off in his hand, exposing the Infinity Ring's satchel around her waist. Stuckey grabbed Sera by the shoulder, whirled her around, and ripped the instrument off her belt.

"You give that back!" Sera screamed in the man's ear as loud as she could, jumping for the Infinity Ring and digging her fingernails into his neck. She wrenched the Ring from him again and punched him in the eye. He staggered back, apparently not knowing quite who he was dealing with.

"Dak! Catch!" Sera shouted and tossed the Ring to him. He caught it and ran the other way.

Stuckey ran around the deck in the opposite direction to face Dak head-on. He charged at the boy, butting into Dak's stomach with his head. Wild-eyed and breathless, Dak threw the Ring back to Sera as he plummeted to the deck with a *thud*, but the toss was too high. Even though she jumped, it sailed over Sera's head and plunked into the dark water off the edge of the boat.

Without a second's hesitation, Sera took a running leap, vaulting over the side, and dove into the icy water after it.



## Girl Overboard

“MAN OVERBOARD!” yelled one of the sailors at the back of the ship. He immediately dropped the saber Dak had given him and reached for a cylindrical cork life preserver attached to a rope, like an oversized Frisbee. He flung it behind the boat with all his might. Within seconds the word traveled around the ship and the sailors reacted.

“Sera!” Dak screamed. The water was freezing. She could die. He turned to Stuckey and screamed, “I hate you!” And then, spying the saber, he picked it up and ran at the man, brandishing it before him.

“Watch it, kid!” Stuckey yelled, scooting around the blade. “You’re the one who threw it in the water. If she drowns, it’s on your head, not mine.”

The worst thing about that, for Dak, was that it was completely true. With a wild yell he waved the saber, and then drew it back to stab it through Stuckey’s heart. Stuckey scrambled out of the way and ran smack into three equally enormous sailors who had come running when the distress call went out. It took them about four seconds to have Stuckey restrained, and then one of them grabbed Dak around the waist and lifted him up. “Let’s not have anybody lose any body parts just yet,” the sailor said. “We’ll focus on your friend first, and we’ll deal with him later.”

Dak flailed for a minute, and then slowly his senses returned. He handed over the saber with a shuddered breath. “Sera!” he called out. “Sera!” His voice grew ragged from screaming, but he didn’t let up.

While the sailor who had thrown the preserver peered out into the darkness and then pulled a small raft from the hold, the rest of the crew

had immediately dropped anchor so that the boat could slow to a stop. The sailor carried the raft over the side and dropped it into the water. Deftly, he climbed in and began to paddle. “No sightings yet,” he called back to the ship.

“Sera!” Dak screamed into the night. He had already lost his parents. Now his second-worst nightmare was coming true.



Sera’s eyes never left the Infinity Ring. She felt the frigid water on her face and hands first, and then, as it seeped through her clothes, she fought the urge to hyperventilate, for the chill nearly shocked her into sucking in a whole lot of water. But as a scientist, she knew how her body would react. As a swimmer, she knew a lot about chasing rings underwater. And as an inventor, there was no way she could let something so life altering go that easily. She figured she had about a half of a second before the Ring sank too far for her to see it in the darkness, and she would risk her life for that half of a second. Without question. Period.

Her eyes stung with cold and salt water as she followed the Ring down. She knew exactly how a figure-eight-shaped object of the Ring’s density and weight would react when crashing head-on with seawater that was roughly forty degrees Fahrenheit. And she knew that her own momentum and weight would allow her to travel at a much faster rate through water. So all she had to do was not lose sight of it.

But it was dark down there. A lot went through her mind, the first of which was a mistake so obvious that she wanted to kick herself and no, it wasn’t tossing the Infinity Ring on a boat, even though that hadn’t been the smartest thing to do. It was this: They’d been in the water with the Ring before. She should have thought to add some sort of phosphorus coating to it after that so it would glow in the dark. She also should have encased it in something that would allow it to float. But can a girl find Styrofoam anywhere in 1492, or 1792, or 885, or even the 1800s? Not a chance.

As it sank just beyond her grasp and the world grew black, she realized the one and only thing Dak’s cell phone would be good for at this point. She wriggled her hand into her pocket and pulled it from her sopping-wet dress. *There is, indeed, an app for this*, she thought with tremendous satisfaction. She punched the screen and it began to glow, shining out a good five feet in front of her.

And there it was. The Infinity Ring.

Her lungs burned, and her brain and ears told her to go up, not farther down. But she didn't listen to either one. Instead she held the phone in one hand and propelled herself forward with the other. Nothing else mattered, not the brackish water nor the gross seaweed nor, heaven forbid, an icky fish scooting past. She blocked it all out. Finally, her ears pounding and her lungs screaming inside of her, she reached the Ring. She slipped her bumbling, numb fingers around it, scrambled around in the water, and pushed herself in the opposite direction, toward the moon, hoping to break the surface before she blacked out.



She did. Just when she thought she could bear it no longer, she saw that she was nearly there, which gave her the extra energy to shuttle forward. Her entire body ached with cold so sharp she could hardly stand it. She gasped when she broke through the surface, taking the pressure off her lungs, drawing in precious freezing cold air over and over, and then she flipped to her back, chest heaving. The Quaker clothing was weighing her down — the boots, too, making her feel like her feet were made of cement blocks.

She got her breath back, and then she attempted to look around to see if there was anyone nearby who could help her, or if she'd just freeze to death anyway, after all of that effort. Her mind grew fuzzy with the pain of the cold water wrapped around her. The cell phone, now useless, dark, and waterlogged, drifted from Sera's grasp and sank. She struggled with fiercely shaking fingers to shove her hand through one of the circles of the Infinity Ring as far as she could, trying to get it on her wrist, so that when her dead body washed ashore all puffy and bloated, the Ring would be there for Dak so he could get home.

She turned her head to look around, knowing that if she could keep her wooden legs moving, she could keep floating for a while. She saw the cutter in the distance, and when she raised her head out of the water, she could hear them yelling. "That's good," she told herself through chattering teeth. "That's good. They must know I'm out here." She began to kick in a clumsy manner, as best she could. And then she felt something slither over her neck.

"Gross!" she whispered, sure it was a water snake or an eel or something awful like that. It gave her a burst of adrenaline, but when the

snake kept slithering, she reached her numb fingers to get it off of her. With all her effort, Sera lifted it up. It was a rope.

“That’s it,” said a friendly voice she’d never heard before. “Try to slip your arm through it, Sera. Can you hear me?”

Sera thought he meant the Infinity Ring. She nodded in the water, making a wave splash up in her nose. “I did already,” she whispered, bumping her numb hand against the Ring. She could feel herself sinking and she struggled to stay up, but wave after wave washed over her face.

“Sera!” The voice was sharper now. “Put your arm through the life preserver. Do it!”

Sera shuddered and opened her eyes. She saw the life preserver wavering at the edge of her vision, and she heaved her dead-feeling arm into it.

“That’s it,” said the voice. “I’m almost there. Hang on; I’m going to pull you. Whatever you do, don’t let go. Okay?”

“Okay,” Sera whispered. She felt her body move through the water, and soon, the hands belonging to the voice were reaching down, pulling her from under her arms, and dragging her out of the cold ocean into the even colder air. But at least she could breathe.

“Stay with me, now,” the voice said.



Dak had killed his best friend. It wasn’t all-out murder; it was more like reckless endangerment leading to manslaughter or something. Second degree, maybe third or fourth . . . he wasn’t very up on his legal terminology, he realized. He buried his face in his hands, feeling utterly miserable and helpless. He sank to the deck and curled up, hugging his knees and resting his forehead on them. His life was over.

He didn’t even care about the stupid Infinity Ring. He didn’t care that he was stuck here . . . he and his (*cough*) favorite person in the world, Riq, who by virtue of his skin color in this part of the world was considered to be chattel. What a life they’d have. “We’d obviously move to Canada,” he muttered. Or London, or some other cool place where people were treated better. But once they did that, Dak didn’t really care what happened. Nothing mattered without Sera. She was the only one who really understood him, and he had caused her demise.

Every second that ticked by, every minute, made the truth inevitable. The sailors scurried around him, but Dak paid no attention to them. All he



knew was that he had a useless SQuare in his pocket, and he may as well hand it over to the SQ's Time Wardens. The one person responsible for finally figuring out how to finish a time-travel device had now taken all her secrets with her to her watery grave.

“Reel 'em in!” shouted a sailor. “He's got her in the boat. Go, go, go!”

Dak raised his head. “H-he's got her?”

The sailor looked over. “Yes.” He didn't sound very excited.

“Is she . . . ?” He couldn't say it.

“I don't know, son.” He hopped over the rail and hooked himself to the boat with a lanyard harness. He reached down. “Look smart now,” he said to another sailor as they hauled Sera up over the railing, her eyes closed and water thundering to the deck from every part of her, and laid her down.



## The Wee Hours

Sera opened her eyes to find Dak hovering over her. She had never been so cold in her entire life and she couldn't stop shaking. "Hey, mouth breather, will you get out of my face, please? When's the last time you brushed your teeth? Your breath smells like Vígi's."

Dak looked up at the sailors and Captain Grunder, who looked on, silent. "Yep, she's normal," he said. The crew gave a round of applause as Sera sat up, then shakily got to her feet. Someone shoved a blanket at her, and Dak wrapped it around her and held on to her arm so she didn't fall.

"Back at it, men!" the captain shouted. He looked at Sera. "We don't, er, have any spare getups for thee." He blushed. "But I can give thee something to wear until thy clothes are dry."

"Anything will be fine as long as it's not a dress," Sera said, teeth chattering loudly.

"Aye, it is no dress." He handed a stack of clothes to her. "Make thy way to the cabin for some privacy — the crew is removing the stowaways and tending to Dr. Bailey now. They're stuffing the wood stove full for thee." The kindhearted captain blushed again and departed. "We'll be at the harbor in no time."

Sera grabbed on to Dak and they hurried to the cabin, walking by two sailors with Hake. Sera glared at him as she passed. Gamaliel was just easing his way out of the cabin, a bandage on his head but otherwise looking as healthy as ever.

"Sera!" he exclaimed. "I'm so relieved to see you're all right, and so sorry I wasn't of more help. I feel terrible about that."

“Don’t worry. Everything’s fine.”

“And the . . . the device?”

Sera pulled her sleeve up and showed him. “Hopefully I can get it back off my wrist again.”

Dak let out a sigh of relief. He hadn’t dared to ask.

Gamaliel and Dak stepped out of the cabin so Sera could change. She stuck her boots by the stove, put on the captain’s breeches and shirt, fairly swimming in them, and rolled over the waistband, tying a rope around the waist to keep the pants up. Then she added thick, itchy wool socks and put her dry shawl back on over her shirt. She huddled by the stove. “You can come back in now,” she called. Carefully, she worked the Infinity Ring off her wrist and with relief, hid it in the draping shirt.

Dak took one look at her and burst out laughing. “You look funny,” he said. “Ow.” He grabbed his stomach, sore from where the Time Warden had plowed into him.

“Dak . . .”

“No, wait — oh, my henna, get this.” He framed his hands so they made a marquee. “Did you realize you’re wearing — drumroll please — Captain Grunder’s pants! Get it? That one book from third grade? Captain Grunderpants? Remember?”

Sera glared at him. “No.”

“It was about those two guys who make a superhero —”

“For the love of mincemeat, how close to drowning does a girl have to come to get some peace?” Sera said.

Dak snorted and tried very hard to be quiet. It didn’t last long.

“I’m sorry,” he said, choking back a laugh. “Captain Grunder. His pants. Oh, man.” He had to leave the room. Very, very suddenly.

Sera stared at the source of heat. Her teeth still chattered, and she knew they probably would for a while, but that was a good thing. It would be a bad sign if she got so cold her teeth stopped chattering. So she knew she’d be fine. But almost losing the Infinity Ring really made her think about things. Maybe she could shackle it to herself. No, that wasn’t even a little bit funny to imagine after the shackles she’d seen lately. She’d just have to keep using the satchel — sopping wet though it was.



A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

“Are you finally done laughing?” Sera called out.

The door pushed open. It was the sailor from the raft — the one who had saved her. His dark brown eyes shone when he saw her sitting up, the color back in her face — or back out of it, since her lips weren't blue anymore. He stood for a moment, his hat in his hand. He pulled something from his pocket. "I brought you this," he said. He held it out to her. "I found it on the deck. I'm sorry it's broken."

It was the gold chain that Bill had given her back in the year 911. She gasped. "I didn't even realize I'd lost it!" she said. She stood up and threw her arms around his waist, hugging him. "Thank you! It's very valuable — very meaningful — to me." She looked up at his face, his deep brown skin several shades darker than her own. "Thank you for saving me," she said, feeling a little bit shy.

"You're welcome," he said. "That's my job. And now that we're heading into the Annapolis Harbor, I'd better get back out there before the captain tans my hide." He smiled.

Sera frowned. "Would he do that?"

The man tilted his head and smiled. "No, miss — it was just an expression."

"Forgive my asking, but are you — are you all free?" Sera asked, hoping it was not impolite, but she was suddenly very curious what kind of man's pants she was wearing — and if they were those of a slave owner.

"We're all free, yes, miss. Got our papers to prove it." He reached for his pocket.

"Oh! No — no need for that." She waved off his efforts. "I was just wondering what kind of man Captain Grunder is."

The sailor smiled and reached for the door. "He's one of the good ones." With a wink, he swung open the door and went back out.

"And so are you, sir," Sera said to the closed door, holding up a chain of gold that last week had been new, but today was nearly a thousand years old.



## Good Morning, Baltimore!

LUCKILY, JAMES woke up when the U.S. Mail stagecoach stopped. He shook Riq awake. “I’m so hungry,” the boy whined, gripping his stomach.

Riq, forgetting not only where he was but also what year he was in, took a moment to get his bearings. Then he realized they weren’t moving. He sat up and shook his fuzzy brain. “Okay, buddy,” he said. “*Shh*, now. I’ll find you something to eat. But we’ve got to be quiet.”

“I don’t want to be quiet. Where’s my mama?”

“We’re going to see her right now.” Riq peered out the back of the wagon and then hopped out. “Come on,” he whispered.

James stopped fussing and climbed out, jumping to the ground.

“Follow me,” Riq said. He snuck around to the road’s edge and began walking uphill like he had a purpose, even though he’d completely lost his bearings.

A stray chicken clucked at him from the side of the road. Riq glanced around, and then lunged at it. It jumped and skittered around him. Riq tried again, this time managing to scoop it up so it would look like he was delivering something. The chicken flapped and squawked, and Riq almost dropped it, but then it settled down. Riq carried it like a football. His heart pounded. There were white people and black people moving about in buggies and on foot. “Are you still behind me?” he said once, his eyes never leaving the road, constantly scanning the area for anyone who looked like they’d be dangerous or threatening.

“Yes, sir,” James said. He kicked a stone, and it hit Riq in the leg.

“Good job,” Riq said. “You’re doing great, buddy. Don’t kick any more stones, though. Please.” He wished the chicken would lay an egg so he could eat it. His stomach twisted with hunger.

When they reached a cross street, Riq saw a black boy about his age. “Where’s Federal Hill?” he asked in a low voice.

The boy looked at Riq. “You’re standing on it,” he said.

“And the lookout spot is . . . ?”

The boy pointed up to the top of the hill.

Riq scanned the horizon and saw his destination. His heart surged. “Here, have a chicken,” he said, handing the animal to the startled boy. And then he reached his hand back and looked down at his traveling companion. He smiled. “Come on, James. Let’s go find your mama.”

James grabbed Riq’s hand and together they ran the hundred yards up the hill as fast as they could go. As they approached the observatory, young James broke from Riq’s grasp and sprinted ahead.



If there had been a war, Gamaliel Bailey, Dak, and Sera would have fit right in with those who returned injured. Gamaliel with his bandaged head sat beside the two kids, one who was dressed like a sailor but carried dripping Quaker woman’s garb, and the other who was curled up after being socked in the gut by a thug. They were a sight to behold.

After they’d said their good-byes to the crew of the cutter, Gamaliel had guided them to the stables where his horse and buggy waited. They had all climbed in and with a soft-spoken command they were off at a brisk pace to Baltimore.

After a time, Gamaliel nudged Dak. “We’re nearly there,” he said. As the buggy began its journey up the hill, the weak December sun shone through the clouds, and the air was not quite as brisk as it had been. Sera stretched and rerolled her pant legs, tucking them inside her boots so she didn’t trip once they were ready to get out of the buggy. She pulled the shawl close around her shoulders, knowing she looked like a total weirdo, but she didn’t care. In fact, nothing that had happened to her was on her mind now. She was focused on Riq, hoping nothing bad had happened to him. It would be so typical for something else to go wrong right about now.

Gamaliel stopped the buggy and the three climbed out. Gamaliel tied the reins to the hitching post. Sera looked at Dak, Dak looked at Sera, and

both of them crossed their fingers. Leaving Gammy behind, they ran the rest of the way up the hill to the observatory, dread twisting in the pit of Sera's stomach at every step.

When they neared the meeting spot, Sera squealed. "Riq!" She tore ahead of Dak and tackled her friend, knocking him to the ground.

"Watch the nose!" he said. He took one look at her and started laughing. "I don't even want to know what happened to you," he said. When Dak joined the party on the hill, Riq gave them both a smile — one of the most genuine smiles they had ever seen on him. He reached out and slung his arms around their shoulders. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you guys," he said. But his smile quickly faded. "Now we just need to find Kissy and John."



## The Job Has Just Begun

STANDING TOGETHER on Federal Hill, Sera introduced Gamaliel to Riq, but Riq could barely concentrate enough to shake hands with the man. *Where are they?* he wondered.

He trained his eyes on the bay below, straining to see any sign of Kissy or John. Absently, he recounted to the others what had happened to him and how he came to be traveling with James.

Meanwhile, Gamaliel went in search of breakfast for everyone. After the man returned with food, he stationed himself as a guard, keeping an eye out for SQ and slave traders. After a time, he spoke. “Perhaps we should find a safer place to wait.”

Riq frowned, scanning the area as people walked here and there. He knew the Hystorian was right — he and James weren’t safe out in the open like this. But he couldn’t go back on his last words to Kissy. He couldn’t risk them missing each other. “No,” he said, determined. “I promised her we’d be here. We can’t leave. There’s no way she won’t be here.”

On the inside, Riq’s confidence crumbled. He could think of two things that could stop her. He looked at James, who’d been collecting sticks and brown crunchy leaves and rotting acorn caps. The boy squatted in the dirt, making a fort out of his supplies. Riq leaned over and wiped a smudge of dirt from James’s face. *What have I done?*

Dak sat down to play with the boy while Sera joined Riq on the lookout for the missing parents. Riq couldn’t stand still. What if



something had happened to Kissy and John? What on earth was Riq supposed to do with James if they didn't show up?

Riq felt Sera's hand on his arm. He stopped pacing.

"I'm *sure* they're coming," she said.

Riq shook his head and looked at her, his nose throbbing, his body exhausted. "I'm just . . . I'm afraid I made a really big mistake. And I'm not sure . . . what . . . to do . . ." He swallowed hard and massaged his temples, trying to hide his pooling eyes. "I shouldn't have insisted on going with them. If I'd just stayed with you guys and the Hystorian . . ."

"Then James would have been left alone on shore and captured by those slave traders, and he'd *never* see his parents again." Sera folded her arms. "Is that what you want? You'd rather just not have to deal with him? Because the Hystorian quest is so much more important?" Her eyes flared.

"No!" Riq felt heat rising to his face. "That's not it at all. I'm just not sure what we're supposed to do now. I messed everything up."

"Well," Sera said, "it seems to me you did something right. And I'm not worried." Her voice grew thick. "Parents have a way of finding their children. Even when it seems impossible. I'm just sure of it." She turned away and blinked rapidly.

Riq was quiet. He thought of Dak's parents whizzing through time, shoving the key into Dak's hand before they disappeared, trying their best to help their son even when they needed help themselves. And he thought of Sera, whose Remnants had her convinced of the bond she shared with a mother and father she never knew. And then he thought of his parents. After a moment he scraped the ground with his shoe. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe."

"She'll be here," Sera said again. "If she doesn't come, then there's no hope for any of us."

*You don't know how right you are,* Riq thought.



A short while later, a timid-looking woman with dark brown skin approached. She looked at James, and then turned to Riq.

"May we help you?" Riq asked. He felt a surge of hope — maybe this woman knew where Kissy was.

"I'm looking for Riq."

"That's me."

She pointed at the boy. “That James?”

“Maybe. Why?”

“Kessiah sent me to give you a message,” the woman said.

Riq’s eyes widened. “What is it?”

“I’m to tell you she’s found Aunt Harriet and wishes you to meet her in Wilmington. She has sent a wagon to collect you.” The woman looked up. “Come with me. I’ll take you there.”

“Is she okay?” Sera asked. “Is everything all right?”

“She’s fine,” the woman said. “She said not to worry. Just come.”

“Where in Wilmington?” Dak asked, eyes narrowed.

The woman rattled off the response as if she’d been expecting the question. “The home of Aunt Harriet’s Quaker friend, Thomas Garrett.”

Gamaliel harrumphed, catching Riq’s attention. The man’s brow was furrowed and he shifted uneasily. Riq caught his eye and the two exchanged a look before Riq turned back to the woman.

“*Kessiah* said that?”

“Yes.”

“And she’s with *Aunt Harriet*?”

“Yes,” she said with a huff. “Now, if you’ll please follow me.”

“It will be our pleasure,” said Gamaliel.

The woman shook her head. “Just the two, James and Riq — they’re all I’m supposed to collect,” she said, looking at the Latina and the Caucasian of the group, and eyeing Gamaliel suspiciously.

“Oh,” Dak said. “We’re all family. Aunt Harriet won’t mind.”

The woman looked confused, but said nothing. “I’m not sure they’re expecting so many . . . for dinner.”

“We don’t eat much,” Sera said.

The woman knew when she was beat. She turned to walk down the hill, glancing behind her to check that the group was following.

Riq had an idea. He let Gamaliel round up James and walk ahead with the woman, while he fell back into step with Dak and Sera. In a low voice, he began speaking in Tlingit. Immediately, Dak and Sera’s earpieces, which they hadn’t used at all in this era, clicked in to the language and translated.

“Something isn’t right, you two. Kissy calls her aunt *Minty*, not *Harriet*. And I don’t believe for a second that she’d go on ahead to Wilmington without James.”

“You think she’s in trouble?” asked Dak. His translator tooth cap did its job translating the words to Tlingit.

Riq nodded. “Someone must have captured Kissy and John, and discovered they were headed here. Now they’re after James and me, so they can sell us all over again.”

“Too bad they didn’t count on us,” Sera said.

“Exactly,” Riq said. “I say we pretend like we buy her story, and when we get there, we’ll barge in and throw a wrench in their operation. With any luck, we’ll catch an SQ agent and be able to learn something about their larger plan. It can be our first step in getting the Underground Railroad back on its tracks before it derails for good.”

“Great plan,” Sera said.

“Agreed,” said Dak.

The three shared a grin. It was good to be back together at last.



## Onward and Upward

THE TRIP to Wilmington would take most of the day. On the way, James took an immediate liking to their escort and began talking to her nonstop, now that he was finally allowed to talk as much and as loudly as he wanted. Meanwhile, Sera, Dak, and Riq found a spot in the wagon as far away as possible and they continued their quiet conversation in Tlingit.

“I spoke with Gammy. He says Thomas Garrett really does live in Wilmington. He’s legit,” Sera reported.

“Does he know what Mr. Garrett looks like?” Dak asked.

“Totally.”

“Rock on. So we’ll know right away if we’re dealing with a phony. I’d sure hate to tackle the wrong guy.”

“Well, the real Mr. Garrett sounds amazing!” Sera said with a wide grin. “He has this huge house and he gets into trouble all the time for hiding slaves there. In court, he said something like ‘you can put me in jail and take all my money, but I’m still going to keep helping people who need help.’ He’s had to pay a pantsload of fines and he just keeps going! Or at least he did,” Sera said, and she turned serious again. “He’s one of the Hystorians that nobody’s heard from in days.”

“That is so not cool,” said Riq.

“But you know what definitely is cool?” Sera asked. “It’s so amazing that you found your family, Riq, and got to spend some time with them.” She looked at her hands. “I guess I’m a little jealous.”

Riq flashed a small smile and let out a sigh. “Don’t be.” He felt a pain in his heart, and for the briefest of moments, he longed to share his

personal fears with the other two. But he couldn't, and soon the moment passed, which was for the best. He didn't want anyone trying to talk him out of doing the right thing.

Not feeling like talking much anymore, he lay down on his side and closed his eyes. "We should all get some sleep while we have the chance."



When they arrived, it was early evening. The time travelers got out of the wagon, and James jumped and ran around outside in the open air, entirely fed up with being forced into so many tight places for the past two days. Riq marveled at the boy's energy.

Finally, they all approached the stately home of Thomas Garrett. When they knocked on the door, they were met by a tall, pale woman. Her hair was flaming red, and her lips the color of an oil slick.

Riq sucked in a breath.

"Welcome," she said, sounding totally unwelcoming. "I am Ilsa." Her voice was colder than the Chesapeake Bay.

As she ushered them inside and dismissed the woman who'd led them from Federal Hill, Riq spoke under his breath to Sera and Dak. And since all the Tlingit tongue clicking was getting old, this time he spoke in Russian. "She's the spitting image of Tilda — the Lady in Red."

"The one who wants to take over the SQ?" Sera said. "But how'd she get here without a —"

"*Shh*," Riq said. "I don't think it *is* her. She just looks like her."

"Is it too late to change our minds about this?" Dak whispered.

The red-haired woman folded her arms and leaned toward the three. "Yes," she said in perfect Russian. "As a matter of fact, it *is* too late." She switched back to English. "Gentlemen," she called out.

Riq heard the door close behind him.

"Yes, ma'am," rang out a choir of voices.

"It appears your hunches were correct." She looked at Gamaliel. "And you've also managed to bring me the next Hystorian on my list. How convenient."

Slowly, they all turned around to find Hake, Stuckey, and several other SQ agents circling them like a pack of starving wolves.



## A Trap Is a Trap Is a Trap

DAK PRIDED himself on being smart. But it sure didn't seem as if being smart was enough to keep him from walking into traps every other day.

He'd assumed they'd be up against a single undercover SQ agent, like the fake Mrs. Beeson. He'd assumed they'd have the advantage and that surprise would be on their side. He'd assumed wrong.

But he was smart enough to know when they were beat. As much as he wanted to fight, they didn't have a chance.

Ilsa knew it, too. She smiled an evil smile. "Hake, Stuckey, take the darling Bowley boy to the cellar to wait with the other auction items," she said, voice dripping with contempt. She held up a finger and tapped it to her black lips. "On second thought, let's not give them the satisfaction of seeing the boy. Instead, take them all to the holding room, while I alert my colleagues to the good news of the time travelers' arrival. Most of them have begun their journey here already, so it won't be long. Then we'll have tea and learn about all their little secrets." She laughed a sinister laugh.

James looked scared. Dak tried to reassure him with a strained smile and a wink. "Just stick close to us, buddy," he whispered.

"How are you jerks even here?" Sera asked as Hake grabbed her by the arms. "You attacked us in public! You should be in jail."

Ilsa clucked her tongue. "They were acting within the law in their pursuit of stolen property. Under the Fugitive Slave Act, it's all of you who are the criminals."

Stuckey took the satchel from Sera's belt while Dak dropped his eyes to the ground. "Man, I really hate this time period," he mumbled.



As one of the burly agents rough-armed him down the hallway, Riq glanced around, taking in whatever he could. The house was large, but there was hardly any furniture, which made all the rooms they passed look the same. Soon they reached a locked door. Riq could hear muffled sounds coming from the other side of it. One of Ilsa's cronies pulled his set of keys from his belt and unlocked the door, and Riq and the others were dragged inside.

What they saw shocked them. All along the walls of the unfurnished sitting room stood more than a dozen men and women. There were Quakers next to collared priests, Nanticoke Indians next to Pennsylvania Dutch. Their skin colors ranged from darkest dark to palest pale — it was a true American melting pot. Riq might have choked up at the sight of it, if it weren't for one little thing: Each person in the room was shackled to the wall and gagged.

Riq felt his eyes grow wide as he looked at all the faces in the room, and wider still when the Time Wardens pulled more shackles and gags from a tiny closet.

"Come now," said Gamaliel. "Is it necessary to shackle the children?"

Stuckey rubbed his chest where Sera had kicked him only a day before. "It's necessary. But it's also a pleasure."

There was nothing they could do. Riq watched as his friends were shackled to a bar that ran the length of the far wall. He was the last to be tied down. He hadn't missed the feeling of chains around his wrists. And the gag made it that much worse.

The Time Wardens checked the shackles to make sure they were secure, and then they stalked back out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Dak made a number of muffled noises as he appeared to recognize a few people, trying to shout out their names, but everything he said sounded like "Woowoo woo! Hawweewa eehee oo!"

Riq felt powerless. He couldn't even console James, who was sniffing, trying to dry the tears from his eyes with his shoulder.

It was then that he realized he had completely failed to accomplish his one goal: keeping Kissy and her aunt Minty safe so they didn't get sold back into slavery. How could he have let go of the mission? He'd

been arrogant again, and now look at them: Kessiah and John were in a cellar somewhere about to be auctioned off, and Aunt Minty . . . well, he supposed she was in this room somewhere.

He looked around at all the faces, and he was surprised that no one looked scared. They all wore expressions of extreme dignity. These were men and women who didn't break under pressure. They didn't give up when things got tough. They probably didn't even *complain* when things got tough.

Riq felt pride building up inside of him. He thought of all the people throughout history — Hystorians, but other people, too — who had sacrificed everything to help others. The presence of so many heroes in one room gave him the motivation to keep going. He just *had* to get out of here — for James's sake if for no other reason.

There were two African-American women in the room, one who was rather tall and grand looking, and another as short as Sera and somewhat plain. Riq thought back to the pictures from Grandma Phoebe's album and knew by sight that the shorter woman was Aunt Minty — Araminta Harriet Ross Tubman — who he just knew was destined for greatness if it weren't for the SQ. He caught the woman's eye and she managed to make hers twinkle at him. He looked down at the floor, feeling awkward, and when he glanced at her again, she appeared to be asleep on her feet. Perhaps he'd imagined the twinkle.



While Riq was lost in thought and Dak was talking to himself in his newly created fourth language (English, pig latin, Spanish [one word], and now Mufflygag), Sera was kicking herself for not insisting they come up with a better plan before waltzing into an SQ stronghold. What were they going to do now, without anyone to help them? Without a key to unlock these shackles?

*Wait a second*, she thought. She looked up. “Ah hee!” she cried, though no one could understand her through the gag. Wildly, she kicked Dak. “Ah hee!” she said. “Ah hee!”

“Wha?” Dak scrunched up his face, trying to understand her. “Ahi?”

Sera shook her head violently. “Hee! HAY-HEE-WHY. Hee.”

Dak shook his puzzled face. “Wha?” he asked again.

“Ah hee frohm you pahents!”



Riq lifted his head, suddenly alert. He nodded at Sera and tried a different tactic. “Ih you pockeh!”

Dak tilted his head. “Oooh,” he said. “Ah *hee*.” He nodded thoughtfully. And then he looked down at his pocket . . . which was nowhere within reach of his shackled hands.

Sera soon realized the problem as well. Her shoulders slumped. *There’s no way it could be the right key anyway*, she thought. *What are the odds?* But like she’d said earlier, parents seemed to have a way of finding their children. And Dak’s parents had always been there for him. Always.

A clanging noise from between her and Dak startled her. She looked down at James, and then up at the now empty shackle that had once held his right arm. He shook his wrist, pulled the gag out of his mouth, and grinned. “I did it,” James said. He examined his freed wrist and frowned. “Got a scrape.”

“Oh!” Sera said. “Me, hoo?” She bent as close to James as she could and tried to say, “Can you take my gag out, too, please?”

James seemed to have no trouble understanding her, and he stretched toward her as far as he could, just barely able to grasp Sera’s gag while his left arm remained shackled overhead. He pulled her gag down, and Sera let out a relieved sigh. “Thank you,” she said in a whisper. “We still need to be quiet, okay?”

James nodded.

“How did you do that?”

“I made a stick with my hand and pulled it out,” James said, matter-of-factly. “This one is still stuck, though.” He tugged on the chain to prove it.

Sera smiled at him, then caught Dak’s eye. “Can you reach Dak’s gag?” she asked.

Dak leaned toward James, and James lunged for the gag, straining against his shackle. “Nope,” James said. And then he looked at Sera. “I can reach his pocket, though. Do you want me to get the key you were talking about?”

A burst of muffled chuckling rippled through the room, and Sera realized all the other prisoners had been watching intently. She grinned at the boy. “Yes, please.”

Now that he had an audience, James beamed. He strained away from Sera and fished the key from Dak’s pocket. Then he twirled around on his

chain and strained the other way, trying to get more laughs. He held the key out to Sera, not quite able to reach her hand.

And so he tossed it.

Sera's grin turned to a gasp as the key bounced off her hand and clinked to the ground.



## Free at Last?

JAMES COULDN'T reach the floor. He bowed his head in shame. "It's okay," Sera said. She closed her eyes and tried to use her shoulder to wipe the sweat from her forehead. When she opened her eyes again, she realized that everyone in the room had frozen at the sound of the key hitting the floor. Now they watched her, encouragement and praise beaming from the crinkles around their glistening eyes. Sera glanced at Gamaliel, Dak, and Riq, who were all nodding their encouragement. She looked at James, whose bottom lip was trembling. "No worries, kid," she said. "We can do this."

She placed her foot on the key and slid it to the wall. With that done, she took a deep breath and relaxed her muscles, and then she tensed up again and began the painstaking job of pushing a single key up a wall with her foot.

"Glad I'm wearing Grunder's pants, or this could get awkward," she muttered.

She had to move slowly. When her leg began to wobble and shake, Sera closed her eyes. Sweat dripped down her temples now, her thigh muscles burned, but she held her position, gathering her inner strength. And then she began moving once again, centimeter by centimeter, until finally her thumb and forefinger grasped the key. She exhaled, and a murmur swept through the crowd. *So this is what it's like to be on a sports team when you're not the one messing up*, she thought.

But it wasn't over yet.

There was no way to get the key in the lock with a hand that was shackled, so she pulled her chained arm toward her mouth instead and

yanked her head and torso toward it, straining her neck so that she could clench the key in her teeth.

With her mouth closed around the key, Sera tilted her head slowly, looking cross-eyed at the end of the key in order to line it up with the shackle's lock. She prayed that her hunch was right, knowing that all her efforts could be for nothing.

The room was so silent she could hear mice skittering in the walls. Sera pushed the key into the lock and slid it as far as she could until it hit metal. She took a few breaths now that it was somewhat set in place, and then slowly she tilted her head the other way, eyes closed, listening, until she heard and felt a *click*, and the shackle opened, falling off her wrist and thudding against the wall.

"Hee hee!" she said, one wrist free. She wiped the sweat from her forehead. She grabbed the key from the dangling shackle, freed her other wrist, and looked around the room and grinned. The prisoners were waving their hands in silent applause, and she held a finger to her lips. She shook out her hands to get the blood flowing again, and then she moved around the room unlocking shackles like it was going out of style.

Dak turned to Gamaliel while Sera made the rounds. "Is everyone here a you-know-what?" he asked.

"Everyone present is a Hystorian in addition to being an abolitionist, yes. There's no need for secrecy."

Dak smirked. "Speaking of secrecy, aren't you guys supposed to be a secret organization? How did the SQ manage to track everyone down?"

The short African-American woman answered as Sera unlocked her shackles. "It was the lanterns," she said. "They figured out what the lanterns meant. We led them straight to us."

Riq stepped forward. "Aunt Minty, is that you?" he asked.

She raised her chin. "Do you have my niece?" she said softly.

"She's here in the cellar with her husband and baby. Your journey to help them to freedom may be delayed, but it is by no means cancelled."

Harriet Tubman smiled. "Your encouraging words will carry me."

Gamaliel Bailey stepped forward alongside a large white-haired man wearing a suit. "Dak, Sera, Riq, this is Thomas Garrett. It's his house that Ilsa has taken over as the hub for this entire plot."

Thomas Garrett smiled. "At your service," he said. "It is a pleasure to know you, although I would have liked it to be under better circumstances." He roared in laughter and was subsequently shushed by a number of people in the room.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Dak said, rubbing his wrists, a grin playing at the corner of his lips. “You have a lovely home, despite your lack of furniture.”

“I apologize — I had to sell it all to pay a rather large fine for helping fugitives,” the man said.

“Well, that’s pretty cool of you,” Dak said. He paused. “Do you by chance know the way out of here?”

Thomas Garrett chuckled. “I believe I do. But we have one small hurdle remaining.”

Riq heard the concern in Mr. Garrett’s voice. “What is it?” he asked.

The man pointed to the door. “Ilsa has locked us in. And there’s no way to unlock that door from this side.”



## In Which the Hystorians Are Reshackled, Only Not Really

DAK AND Sera looked at each other. “I guess this means we’ll have to make them open it, then,” Dak said. “Unless you have any non-life-threatening scientifically experimental ways to break this lock.”

“Come off it, Smyth,” Sera muttered. “It was one time. One time!”

“Eyebrows,” Dak reminded her.

“You’re kind of obsessed with your eyebrows. It’s weird.”

“Your face is weird.”

“Good grief,” Riq said. “Could you do this later, please? We’ve got stuff to do.”

“He’s right, knock it off,” Dak said.

Sera rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she said, turning her attention back to the group. “Here’s the plan. Everybody, go back to your places and put your wrists back into the shackles — but for the love of mincemeat, don’t close them — just make it look like you’ve got them on. Gags loosely in your mouths, too. I know, I know, spit-tacularly gross, but this is what we do for the good of society.”

Everyone but Riq and Dak went obediently to his or her place and slipped their gags and shackles on.

“I really, *really* like this group of people,” Sera muttered. She looked at James. “If fighting happens, you stay out of the way, okay? Just hide in that corner.” She pointed, and then she addressed the group once more.

“Good, now Ilsa and her thugs took something of mine — something they won’t know how to use. I’m going to pretend to offer her instructions in

exchange for your freedom,” she said. “Just play along like you’re trapped there until I say the secret word, which means scream and attack. Once they’re in this room they’ll be surrounded, and we can overpower them. *Capice?*”

Riq leaned over and whispered, “What’s the secret word?”

“The secret word is . . .” Sera pondered it for a moment.

“Eighteen-abibble,” Dak said calmly.

Sera looked at him and grinned. “Oh, yeah. I forgot.” She looked at the Hystorians. “Eighteen-abibble. Got it?” They all nodded.

Riq shook his head. “Stupidest secret word ever,” he muttered.

“Yeah, well, at least nobody will say it by accident. Let’s take our places and get ready for a fight.”

Just then, the door burst open. Ilsa marched into the room, followed by an entire squad of SQ agents, including the fake Mrs. Beeson. All were armed, and all looked extremely dangerous.

And in her hand, Ilsa gripped the Infinity Ring.



## Eighteen-abibble!

SERA, DAK, and Riq, the only ones not yet in their places, whirled around, and their eyes nearly popped out of their heads at the sight of the small army. “Great Wisconsin cheese hats, it’s a war Break after all,” Dak said. His lip curled at the sight of fake Mrs. Beeson.

Ilsa looked furious. “You’re too sneaky for your own good! But no matter. I don’t think you’re going anywhere without this.” She lifted the Ring into the air.

Sera’s heart sank to see the device in enemy hands, but she knew she could still fix this. She didn’t dare spring the trap yet, though. The SQ had weapons; the Hystorians had nothing. Not safe at all.

“Get her,” the woman said, icy calm.

The Time Wardens grabbed Dak and Riq, and pulled them aside. Sera glanced at Gamaliel and Harriet Tubman and Thomas Garrett, who looked poised to leap to her aid, and shook her head the slightest bit. *No, no, no*, she chanted in her head. She wasn’t giving up this easily. *Wait for the signal.*

Then Stuckey grabbed her by the arm and she gave him a weary look. “Not you again. Easy on the duds,” she muttered. Stuckey pushed her forward to face the red-haired woman. “You’ve got me. I’ll do whatever you say.”

Ilsa narrowed her eyes, regarding Sera for a long, suspicious moment.

“Can you tell dog breath to let go of me, please?” Sera asked.

“Settle down, dog breath,” Ilsa muttered, turning the Infinity Ring in her hands with the utmost care. “How does it work?” she demanded.



“Well,” Sera said, jabbing her elbow into Stuckey’s gut and leaning forward. “You program it to the time and place you want to visit and press GO, and then whenever you’re ready to return here just press GO again and it’ll bring you home automatically. That feature’s kind of like the LAST button on your TV remote.” She nodded knowingly. “It’s slick.”

Ilsa frowned at the strange words. “How do you tell it where to go?” Her tone was still harsh, but curious.

“It’s very precise, I’m afraid. I’ve spent forty years learning how to use it.”

“Forty years?” Ilsa spat out. “You’re a child.”

Sera gave Ilsa a strange look. “I beg your pardon? We all look like this at sixty-five.” She laughed. “I mean, I figured you must be at least a hundred and fifty years old, maybe one seventy-five, right?”

Ilsa’s face burned.

“No?” Sera’s voice faltered. “Oh, my bad. I apologize. I’m sure you’re, um, not bad looking for this day and age. Can I get a woof woof?”

“Just show me how to use it. Now,” Ilsa barked.

“I can’t do it on command. You have to prepare. For one thing, there’s the whole magnetic factor.” She tapped her lips thoughtfully.

“The — what’s that?”

Sera looked at Riq. “Tell her,” she said with a shrug.

“The magnetic factor,” Riq said, “is” — he glanced sidelong at Sera — “a force field.”

“What does it do?”

“It, ah, it pulls anything metal with you when you travel. Which can really mess things up,” he said.

“It’s why we don’t bring coins with us,” Sera continued. “We can’t risk using the device at all until any coins or jewelry are stored in a separate room. Any loose metal at all.”

Riq looked at a Warden’s saber with disdain. “That includes weapons. But don’t worry, you’ve still got us outnumbered.”

Ilsa narrowed her eyes. “All right,” she said, her voice flat. She instructed her men to put their weapons, jewelry, and coins in the room next door. A few of them hesitated, but no one dared speak out against an order. Finally, Ilsa turned back to Sera. “Show me how it works,” she said more forcefully this time, holding the Infinity Ring out but gripping it tightly.

Sera didn’t take it. Instead, she tilted her head and shrugged. “Okay. Where do you want to go?”

“I want to go to the future to see myself and . . . and everything I’ve accomplished.”

“So, maybe twenty years into the future?” Sera asked with a sweet smile. “We need to be very precise.”

“Y-yes. Twenty years from today.” She didn’t sound totally confident.

“Great. Go ahead and program the longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates, and don’t forget to consider the tilt and speed of the Earth, daylight savings time, leap years, and Groundhog Day.” Sera clasped her hands behind her back. “Let me know if you have questions.”

Ilsa stared at the Infinity Ring. Her lips formed a thin black line. She shoved the Infinity Ring back at Sera, poking her in the stomach with it, which Sera thought was a bit on the rude side. “You do it,” Ilsa demanded. “You’re coming with me.”

Sera perked up. “Oh! Why, thank you. I’d love to.” She took the Infinity Ring and started working at it, plugging in numbers, looking off into space, adding and subtracting, tilting her head, thinking about Groundhog Day. After a few minutes of constant tapping on the instrument, she gave the Ring one last serious stare, and then she looked up. “All right,” she said solemnly. “It’s ready. Are you ready?”

Ilsa nodded, gripping one end of the Ring.

Sera flashed a glance at Dak and Riq, and smiled. “Okay, great. We’re going to December blahblah, eighteen-abibble!” And just like that, they were gone.



## A Very Short Trip

THERE WAS a moment of stunned silence. Even Dak was surprised — he hadn't expected Sera to actually warp away with Ilsa. He could only imagine what the SQ agents must be thinking as they looked on with amazement at the spot where their leader had been.

The moment passed quickly. James ran immediately to the corner and crouched into a ball, while the Hystorians sprang into action at the utterance of the secret word.

Dak and Riq joined in the fight as Hake or Stuckey (Dak couldn't remember who was who) reacted to the surprise attack by turning and punching Thomas Garrett in the mouth.

"Hey!" Dak yelled. "Don't be messing with my friend!" He screamed into the jerk's ear as Riq belted the guy in the gut.

Amidst the yelling and screaming, kicking and karate chopping, Sera and Ilsa reappeared in the exact spot they'd been standing in moments before. Ilsa looked traumatized. She screamed, pulling away from Sera and throwing herself against the nearest wall. Sera followed, neatly slapping a dangling shackle around the woman's wrist, before collapsing practically at Ilsa's feet.

"Are you okay?" Riq asked her as he followed her lead, shackling Hake to the wall with the help of Gamaliel Bailey.

"I just need a minute," she gasped.

She took less than half a minute, though, before deciding that she needed to join the fray. Slipping the Ring back into its satchel, she ran to the small closet she'd seen earlier and grabbed two spare shackle chains. She tossed one to Harriet Tubman, and together they took on several

beastly Time Wardens, driving the men to the back of the room with their swinging chains. The Wardens willingly closed the shackles around their own wrists with the promise that the women would put their chains down.

“Sera!” Dak called out as he kicked a guy in the shin. “You guys look like you’re acting out a scene from that online game you play, *Dungeons and More Dungeons*. Chain fights, sword fights . . . wow, just look at Ms. Tubman go!”

“Hmm,” said Harriet.

On the other side of the room, an SQ agent lifted a chair to slam down on Riq’s head.

“Hey!” hollered Thomas Garrett. “Don’t be messing with my friend.” He’d heard Dak say it moments before, and he really seemed to like the sound of it. He ran up behind the guy, grabbed the chair legs, lifted his foot, and kicked the guy square in the kidneys, sending him sprawling toward the next open spot on the wall, where Sera shackled him. The Hystorian reached out a hand to help Riq up.

“Nice one, Mr. Garrett,” Riq said. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, son. Who’s next?” He turned to look at the sprawled bodies of the defeated, most of whom were now chained to the walls.

Being sorely beaten, the remaining few SQ agents turned on their heels and fled. All was soon quiet.

From the corner, James peeked through his fingers. “Can I come out yet?”

Riq laughed and ran over to the boy, lifting him high in the air.

The Hystorians, nursing minor cuts and bruises, were beaming through their pain. Dak couldn’t stop grinning, too. “Man,” he said. “That was the best fight I’ve ever seen, and the war doesn’t even start until —”

“Eighteen-abibble,” Riq said, shushing Dak with a look.



Following their victory, Dak chattered excitedly with the Hystorians, many of whom hadn’t realized the kids were from the future until they’d seen what the Infinity Ring could do. Sera spoke quietly with a young woman named Susan, who wore a lovely brooch at her neck. But Riq stood aside with James and watched. He had a small smile on his face, but inside . . . inside, he was choking up a little. Maybe a lot.

He caught Harriet Tubman's eye and walked over to her. "Let's go find your niece," he said. He put a hand on Thomas Garrett's sleeve. "Can you show us where the cellar is?"

Together they walked through the hallways of Thomas Garrett's home to one of several secret rooms, then climbed down a set of stairs to the cellar. Mr. Garrett held a lantern, and Harriet called out, "Kissy? We're coming for you!"

"Aunt Minty?" cried Kissy, stepping out of the darkness, with John right behind.

"Mama!" shouted James. He leapt from Riq's arms and ran to his mother, throwing his arms around her.

"James!" Kissy sobbed, falling to her knees as her son buried his face in her dress. After a moment she looked up at Riq, tears streaming down her face. "I don't know how it could ever be possible to thank you," she said.

Riq stood in the cellar's shadows as Kissy and her aunt Minty embraced. Kissy recounted their story, telling how they were captured within sight of Federal Hill. The story made Riq shudder, knowing it could have been him. Harriet told of her capture as well. "This reunion almost didn't happen," Harriet Tubman said. She looked at Riq. "We owe a lot to you," she said. She held out her hand, drawing him into their family circle.

"And I owe my life to you," Riq said. "I feel . . . I feel as though you were family. Somehow." He couldn't look at them. Before today, they *had* been family. But now, as long as Kissy and John remained safe the rest of the way to freedom in Canada, Kessiah wouldn't end up in the South again, which is where she'd need to be in order to have the exact child that was Riq's great-great-great-grandfather. She might have more children, different children, but they couldn't be the same. Their lives would be vastly different. Their stories would be foreign to Grandma Phoebe's scrapbook.

Grandma Phoebe's scrapbook wouldn't even exist. And neither would she.

Riq's bottom lip quivered. Even surrounded by so many people, he felt more alone than ever before.

Harriet watched him solemnly, and then she embraced him. "After all you've done for us? You'll be the child I never had," she said in a gruff voice. "There. Now we're family. Got it?"

Riq laughed in spite of his sorrow. "You're totally legit," he said.



## A Parting Gift

THOMAS GARRETT might not have had much furniture left, but his pantry was full enough to feed a small army of Hystorians. Dak was in his element again, surrounded by people who were living history. And shaping it.

Some of them he knew from history books. Others he didn't. Maybe since they'd exposed the SQ's plot and captured the ringleader, everyone here would now go on to be famous.

But that wasn't really the point, Dak thought. They were all fighting to change the course of history. They would accomplish far more together than any of them could hope to accomplish alone. And now Dak and his friends were a part of that, too.

So were his parents. Somehow, wherever they were, they'd known that he would need their help today. And they'd come through. Maybe everything would turn out okay, despite the odds.

He hoped the odds against the abolitionists would be a little bit easier now, at least. The SQ was still out there, but with any luck the abolitionists would take advantage of their second chance and go on to do great things.

That was the best thing about history, after all: the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of your past.

Mistakes like burning off somebody's eyebrows, for instance.



Riq was able to find a quiet corner of Mr. Garrett's house, where he pulled out the Square. He should have been solving the puzzle to figure out where they would go next, but instead he opened the Square's journal, where Dak sometimes recorded the details of their adventures. He started a new file.

For a lover of languages, Riq didn't spend a lot of time writing. He didn't tend to tell stories. He didn't really feel he had interesting stories to tell.

But he had his grandma Phoebe's stories. Riq realized that if he disappeared now — if he had uprooted his entire family tree while fixing this Break — well, that was a sacrifice he was willing to make if it meant saving everyone else. He couldn't sacrifice his grandma's stories, though. He wanted them to live on.

So Riq typed late into the night. He recorded every detail of his family tree as he remembered it. Every detail about his grandma. And his parents.

He hoped that even if he didn't survive what came next, Dak and Sera would be able to keep these stories safe.



Sera looked around Thomas Garrett's house. She was a little bit in awe of a man who so humbly refused to take credit for the huge sacrifice he'd made. He'd been forced to pay his last dollar in fines for helping fugitive slaves. He'd had to admit to his own friends and neighbors that yes, he had helped their slaves escape, and he'd said to them, "Just what are you going to do about it, kill me? Go ahead." Even after all that, he was more dedicated than ever to his calling and quest. His home was and would always be a safe house — as long as he was alive and had the means to help, he would help. When Sera had a moment alone with him and asked him what he most wanted, his simple reply was, "Freedom for all."

She wanted to warn him how long it would take, how many obstacles there would be. She wished she could tell him that they had magically fixed everything and tomorrow, all would be equal. But she knew that wasn't true. Things were still messed up. Real change took time.

"Communication is really important," she told him instead. "And so is keeping the SQ far away from the Underground Railroad. If you guys

all stick together, and do what you did today to fight off the SQ, you might just have something big happening here.”

Thomas Garrett smiled. “Thank you,” he said, hand over his heart.

And then Sera drew something from her sailor pants pocket and held it up to the lantern light so he could see it. It dangled and glittered, catching the reflection of the jumping flames. She took his bruised wrist and turned it, palm up, and then she set the gold chain in his hand. “This is very, very old,” she said. She showed him the tiny stamp with the year 885 engraved on it. “One of the links is broken, but it’s still worth a lot.” She closed his fingers over it. “You can sell this to keep things going for the abolitionists, okay? You need it a lot more than I do.”

Thomas Garrett looked at his closed fist, and then he looked at Sera. He knew better than to say no to the *Dungeons and More Dungeons* master, and so he simply smiled and said, “Thank you.”





## Safe Passages

GAMALIEL BAILEY and most of the other abolitionists were eager to get home after their long absences. There was room enough for those who stayed behind to sleep in Thomas Garrett's house. Sera finally got the bath she so desperately wanted, and Dak and Riq each bathed, too, at Sera's insistence. Donning her dry Quaker garb once again, she joined the others at dawn to take the chained SQ to jail for endangering and threatening the lives of children and adults alike. Not even the Fugitive Slave Act could protect them after all they'd done.

Riq couldn't help but notice that Ilsa was taking their defeat especially hard. He'd expected her to resist or make threats, but she remained quiet. Almost eerily so.

After they'd gotten rid of Ilsa and the rest, they all headed to the train station, where Harriet Tubman and John Bowley, who had their free papers, accompanied a very large, very fragile crate on a one-way trip to Ontario, Canada. Harriet would be back, she promised. But first she'd see to it that Kissy and her family made it safely all the way. "It's the most amazing feeling," Harriet said, "standing in freedom. Seeing your free fingers, your free toes, your free everything." She embraced Riq. "Will we ever see you again?"

"I don't think so," Riq said.

"Well, if you're ever in New York, come by," she said with a shy grin, handing him a piece of paper. "That's where I'm going to build my dream home once this is all over."

Riq took the paper and hugged the tiny woman. "Thank you," he said.

Dak, Sera, and Riq walked back to Thomas Garrett's house with the man himself and with the real Mrs. Beeson, who would be making the trip back to Cambridge on the same pilot cutter on which Sera and Dak had been passengers. "Tell them all thank you for me," Sera said. "And please give Captain Grunder his pants back."

Dak snorted. He poked Riq. "Captain Grunder pants. Get it?"

"No."

"That book about —"

"No."

"The two guys and their —"

"NO."

"All right, all right already. You guys are so serious all the time."

Riq ignored Dak and turned to Mrs. Beeson. "There's something that's been bothering me since we first arrived," he said. "There's a shed near your house. Does it have a trap door in it?"

"Thee are a smart lad, I see," Mrs. Beeson said. "Indeed it does. It is one of my hiding places on the farm."

"We saw the floor move," he said. "I wondered if someone has been hiding there."

"I believe it. Before I was overtaken, I told a fugitive to take a lantern and go there. I'd suspected something, told him it wasn't safe in the house. I'm glad he made it. I'll check it upon my return. Thank thee for the information."

"Leave it to us to run away from an actual safe house and into a trap," Dak said.

"Oh," Sera said. "That reminds me — I apologize for any sticky soda mess you might find in the cellar. It was our only way to escape."

"Have no worries," Mrs. Beeson said with a puzzled smile, surely having no idea what the girl was talking about. "Your escape was of most importance. I am blessed to have had you in my home, and sorry for the circumstances encompassing it."

Sera held up a hand. "High five?"

Mrs. Beeson made a fist instead and held it out for the bump. "Thee are legit," she said.



## A Glimpse Forward

THE THREE time travelers decided to catch up with one another before going directly to their next mission. They sat in a meadow nearby, the weak December sun warming their shoulders.

“This was a tough Break in a different way than we’re used to,” Sera mused. She looked at Riq. “For you especially, I mean. Do you wish we hadn’t come here?”

Riq wrapped his fingers around a piece of long yellow grass and pulled. He chewed on one end of it. “At first I hated this place. This time period. I still do, but you know what? It was really heartening to see all the abolitionists just being so . . . so committed like that, you know?” He paused. “Not just committed to being Hystorians, I mean, but to being, well, so human. It puts . . . it helps put things into perspective.”

Dak nodded. “It makes me want to be like them with the work that we’re doing.”

“Me, too,” Sera said. “I wish we could know what kind of difference they’ll make now.”

“Didn’t you already have a glimpse of the future with old stony-faced Ilsa?” Dak asked.

“Yeah, where did you go, anyway?” Riq asked.

Sera’s face paled. She looked at the ground. “Nowhere, actually. I, um, I programmed the Infinity Ring to five seconds in the future, so we’d blip out and back in again. I just wanted to cause a distraction for you guys.”

Dak grinned. “Well, in that case, since you didn’t waste a trip earlier, maybe we can do it now?”

Sera bit her lip. “I don’t know, Dak. The Infinity Ring isn’t a toy.”

“I think we should,” Riq blurted. “Just this once, I’d like to know how things turned out.” He took a deep breath and blew it out. “If nothing else, I need to know what happened to James.”

Dak turned to Sera. “You can’t say no to that!”

Sera shrugged. “Okay. Let’s go forward a bit and see.”

“Yes!” said Dak.

“Listen, Dak,” Riq said. “I already told Sera, but I’m saying this to you, too. If anything, like, *happens* to me when we leave here, just . . . keep going.”

Dak frowned. “You sound like a funeral. What’s up?”

“Is it your Remnants?” Sera asked.

Riq nodded. “Yeah. But I think they’ll be over as soon as Kissy makes it to Canada. They just leave me feeling a little strange, I guess. Ignore me.”

“I always do,” Dak said, and punched Riq in the arm.

Riq turned his head slowly and raised an eyebrow. “I’ve got thirty pounds on you, little bro, and I will kick your butt if I have to. Don’t push it.”

With a sigh, Sera flopped back in the grass and pulled out the Infinity Ring just as Thomas Garrett walked up.

“I wanted to say good-bye. It was a delight to know you,” he said. “May I ask where you’ll go next? Or is that a secret?”

“Nah, we can tell you,” Dak said. “We’re going a few years into the future to see how things turned out.”

“Any specifics, Mr. Smyth? Mr. Jones?” Sera asked them, poised to enter coordinates into the Ring.

Riq perked up. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “I do have a place in mind.” He pulled the paper from his pocket and handed it to Sera. “Harriet Tubman’s house in Auburn, New York.”

Dak nodded. “That sounds awesome. Make it, like, 1875ish? The *ahem ahem* war-abibble *should* be over by then, if you get what I’m saying.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Pick a day, any day.”

Riq looked up. “How about July 4?”

Dak grinned. “That’s absolutely perfect.”

Sera started her calculations. “Okay,” she said when she was finished. They called out a round of good-byes to Thomas Garrett, and within seconds, they were catapulting through time and space. When they opened their eyes, they were standing in a very hot kitchen where a short

woman stood on a small stool in front of a stove, stirring stew in a large pot as if she were expecting guests.



## Conductor, Healer, Soldier, Spy

RIQ'S FIRST thought was *I'm still here.*

He hadn't been totally sure he would survive the warp. Sera had said once that as long as they were traveling through time, the three of them were anomalies. Being anomalies meant that changes in the time stream wouldn't affect them, no matter how much history changed around them.

It was good to know she'd been right about that.

Then he realized they were standing smack-dab in the middle of Harriet Tubman's kitchen. He flashed Sera a look, knowing their sudden appearance could scare the poor woman. "You couldn't land us on the front step?" he muttered.

She glared and shoved the Infinity Ring at him. "You want to do this? Say the word, smarty-pants."

Riq sighed. "Good point. Sorry." He rapped on the wall lightly and cleared his throat.

Harriet Tubman, now in her mid-fifties, turned at the noise. She set down her wooden spoon with a *bang* and a hand went to her lips. "Oh, my stars," she said, her voice as rough as a sailor's. "My adopted son has come home." She stepped down from her stool and walked to the time travelers, reaching out to take Riq's hands in her own. "Come in and sit. We've been expecting you."

"We?" asked Dak. He sounded as if he were afraid they'd stepped into another trap.

But the young man who came around the corner had a huge smile on his face. "Riq!" he exclaimed in a booming voice.

Riq hesitated a moment.

“It’s James!” hissed Sera, poking Riq with her elbow.

Riq’s face broke into a wide smile. “Hey! I didn’t expect to see you!”

James gave each of the time travelers a hug as Harriet Tubman watched.

“Do you have a few minutes?” she asked.

Riq smiled again. “I think we can spare a few.”



“So,” Dak began. “We last saw you in eighteen-fifty.”

“Or as I like to remember it, eighteen-abibble,” Harriet said. She smiled.

Dak grinned back. “Nicely played. Hey, does that mean my little phrase caught on? Is everybody saying it now?”

Harriet shook her head. “No. No one is.”

“Oh.” Dak glanced at Sera, who just shook her head and laughed. “Okay, so what happened after we saw you?”

“Well, Mr. Thomas Garrett immediately let me know I might expect to see you today,” Harriet said, eyes merry. “So I made a note to remind myself and kept it in my hat all these years. And I just knew James would want to see you, too, so I let him know and he came down from Canada.”

“That’s right,” James said with a smile.

Harriet recounted her trip aboard the train to freedom, with Kissy, James, and the baby inside the crate, and Harriet, John, and the other Hystorians causing distractions whenever the baby cried or James couldn’t contain his own frustration at being in one more confined space. “James was a pistol on that trip, the poor boy, but he’s grateful to have taken it,” she said. “He remembers it well; don’t you, dear?”

“Like it happened yesterday,” James said. “But what I really remember is being sad that you weren’t there in Canada. Nobody was able to play the horseback game as well as you — they all tired out too fast,” he said with a laugh. “I talked about you to anyone who would listen. I called you my best friend. I’m pretty sure the other kids thought you were imaginary, but Mom always told me I’d see you again.”

Riq didn’t know what to say. He laughed hard so he could pretend like his misty eyes were from laughter. “I remember it like it was

yesterday, too,” he said, rubbing his back. “In fact, it *was* yesterday. I’m still sore.”

Sera narrowed her eyes at Riq. She tapped her fingers on her knee as he wiped his eyes. He had a feeling she suspected something. She flashed him a sympathetic smile, and said to Harriet, “Tell us about the Underground Railroad. Did it continue?”

Harriet nodded her head, almost in wonder. “Yes, the Underground Railroad continued, to the utter consternation of the SQ. The harder they worked to stop us, the harder we fought to keep it going. And it grew. Slaves escaped, told their stories, and word got out about the true situation in the South. I went back and forth to personally guide as many slaves as I could to freedom. And of course, my friend Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book really started jaws a-wagging.”

“*Uncle Tom’s Cabin?*” Dak guessed.

“That’s right. And your friend Gamaliel, God rest his soul, was the first to publish it.”

The three time travelers gasped in unison. “Rest his soul?” Sera said quietly.

Harriet nodded sadly. “He never lived to see emancipation. But he fought for it until his last breath.” She added, “Thomas Garrett is gone, too. He’d become such a dear friend — helping hundreds more slaves after you left. It seems he’d received a very, *very* generous” — she glanced sidelong at Sera — “anonymous donation. It kept him in business for years to come.”

Sera bit her lip in silent glee. Riq knew she must have had something to do with that. But she only said, “Oh? How nice.”

“Any chance there was a president named Lincoln?” Dak asked.

“Yes, indeed. He was decent, though I had to give him a piece of my mind a time or two about allowing slavery to continue in the South.” She frowned. “Took us a few years of war to convince him.”

“So there was a civil war?” Dak asked. “When did it start?”

“Oh yes, there was a civil war. Eighteen sixty-one to eighteen sixty-five. It was tough and it was messy, but the abolitionists won in the end.”

“Only four years?” Dak said. “That’s better than fifteen, but . . .”

“I know,” said Sera. “I was hoping it wouldn’t happen at all.”

James nodded. “Everything was demolished — all through that land we traveled from Cambridge on north, and all over the country. Aunt Minty was in the middle of it all. As a conductor for the Underground Railroad for eight years, she made over a dozen trips into slave territory



to rescue fugitives. She was a nurse for the injured, a recruiter of over five hundred slaves to be soldiers for the North, and even a Union spy.”

Harriet only smiled.

“Wow, a spy?” Riq said with a grin. “My grandma Phoebe would be —” He stopped abruptly and took in a sharp breath. Then he stood up and walked to the window. “Never mind. I’m sorry.”

Harriet and James shared a quiet look, and then James got up and followed Riq to the window while Harriet ushered Dak and Sera to the kitchen for some stew.

At the window, James put his hand on Riq’s shoulder. “We really are related, aren’t we?”

Riq leaned forward, gripping his head in his hands. He swallowed hard. And then he shook his head. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

They stood in silence for a long moment. “Thank you for saving my life,” James whispered. “I grew up free and happy because of you. No matter what, you will always be my brother.”

All Riq could do was nod. “Thanks,” he choked out. “That means more than you know.”

After a moment, Riq wiped his face with his hands, took a deep breath, and smiled. He and James walked into the kitchen and sat with Sera and Dak in front of steaming bowls of stew. He could feel Sera’s eyes on him.

“Whatever happened to Ilsa?” Dak asked.

Harriet frowned. “She disappeared after you did,” she said. “People said she’d gone insane. But every now and then I get a strange feeling coming over me, like she’s got me in her crosshairs. Like if I turned my head an inch more, I’d see her wild red hair disappearing around a corner.” Harriet tapped her lips thoughtfully. “The woman clearly made an impression on me. But that’s all in my imagination, I’m sure.”

“The SQ has eyes and ears everywhere,” Sera said, remembering what Brint and Mari had told them. “You’ve done so much to weaken them — I’m sure they’re tracking you, and I’m sure they’re really mad. Be careful, Ms. Tubman.”

Harriet only laughed. “The SQ ain’t never caught me yet.”

When Riq and the others rose to leave, James and Harriet embraced them all one by one. “You were an inspiration to us all in a dark, dark time — not just for African-American rights, but for women’s rights, too. Whatever you said to my friend Susan B. Anthony really got her going.

Thank you for your service to the Hystorians,” Harriet said, “and for your great sacrifices.” She gave Riq a look that could only come from a battered hero like Harriet. “Whatever they may be.”



Sera led Dak and Riq out of Harriet Tubman’s home the traditional way, through the front door, to catch one more glimpse of the nineteenth century while Riq used the SQuare, working out the puzzle for the next Break.

“You know what would be fun?” Sera said as they strolled along. “Going to some tropical island with lots of food and soap and toothbrushes, where the Break could only be fixed by us taking a vacation.”

“Boring,” Dak said. “I want to go back to Paris.”

“What? Not the Vikings again!”

“No, not 885. Late 1700s kind of Paris.”

Riq tuned in as he worked the SQuare. “Why there?”

Sera laughed. “I know why,” she said. “He wants to get another bottle of soda.”

“So what? I’m a collector!”

Riq shook his head and turned back to the SQuare. “Well,” he said, “you may get your island getaway, Sera.”

Sera gasped. “Really? Are you serious? Where! Tahiti? Barbados? Canary Islands? New Zealand? Tell me!” She gripped his arm. “Come on!”

Riq flashed a grin. “*Hmm*, so very close. How about this — ready? Are you sitting down?”

Sera shook his arm. “Of course not. We’re walking, dog breath.”

“Well?” Dak asked, impatient.

“Okay,” Riq said. “Picture this: gorgeous sunrise over the water on a steamy —”

“Just tell me!” Sera said. “*Ooh*, I can feel the sand between my toes now.”

“That’s probably just silt in your socks from the Chesapeake Bay,” Dak remarked.

Riq’s eyes danced for the first time in days. “Okay, okay. We’re going to Japan. Not exactly tropical, but it’s an island. And there will be samurai. And maybe ninjas. The clue’s a little unclear on that point.”

Sera's jaw dropped. Dak's did, too. And then he grinned and pumped the air with his fist. "Yes!"

"Oy," Sera said, shaking her head. "I hate my life right now. I really do. That was pretty stinking mean, Riq."

"You're just so fun to tease," Riq said.

They rounded the corner where a stately farmhouse stood, a large cornfield behind it. This time the stalks were vibrant green and only knee high. Sera reluctantly pulled out the Infinity Ring and began to program the year and the location coordinates.

"Don't forget to factor in Groundhog Day," Dak deadpanned.

*Groundhog Day*. The term made Sera's stomach clench when she realized what Dak was referring to — her time warp with Ilsa.

Sera hadn't told them the truth about that.

And the truth was: She'd made a horrible mistake with her calculations.

She'd seen the Cataclysm with her own eyes.

*Get a grip, Froste!* she told herself, determined not to let the stress show. She couldn't bring herself to tell Dak or Riq what she had witnessed. She would just have to be strong enough to carry that particular burden alone.

As she finished the last few calculations, the door of the farmhouse burst open and a towering, chiseled-faced woman with white hair — and red undertones — came charging out at them.

The three time travelers looked at one another wearily.

"*Annnd* our lives would just not be complete without a visit from Ilsa," Sera muttered.

"Man, Mr. Garrett could *not* keep a secret," Dak said.

"She does look a little crazy," Riq added.

*I think I know why*, Sera thought. But she kept it to herself. "Grab hold, boys. We're five, four, three, two, one, and —"

Gone.



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You must get Tokugawa to safety, so he can fulfill his destiny as the unifier of Japan!

— Arin

# Samurai



katana:  
type of  
sword

kabuto:  
helmet

sode:  
shoulder  
plates

menpo:  
face  
mask

uwa-  
obi:  
wide  
belt

do: body  
armor

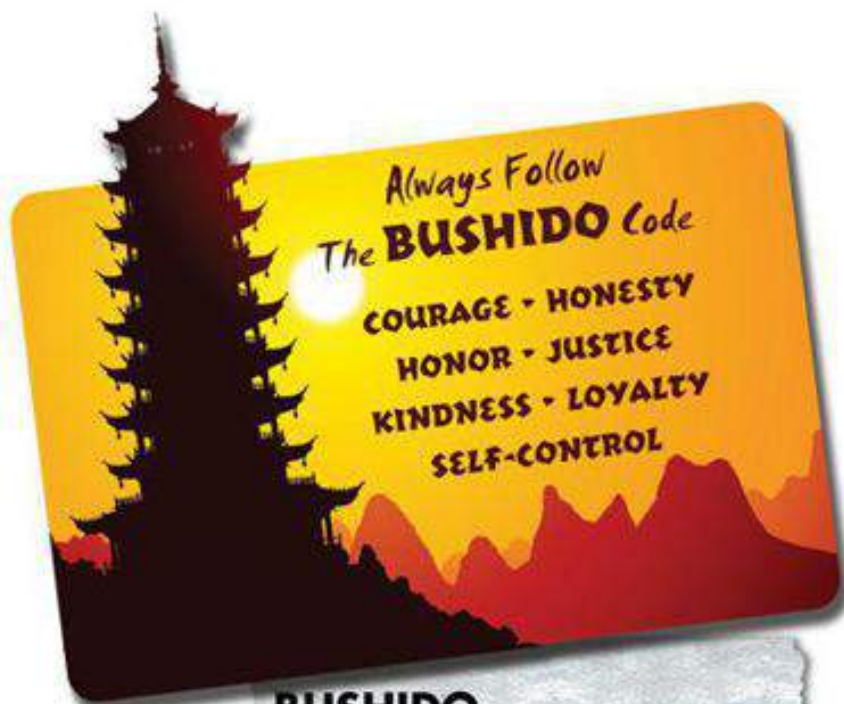
sunate:  
shin  
guards



We hate to ask you to do the impossible, but you must be prepared for a foe that is a master of disguise, can move silently and invisibly, and can strike with precision and dangerous force: SQ ninjas.

While many ninjas used their skills for noble causes, there was one corrupt branch loyal to the SQ, and they used their order's stealth and trickery to achieve evil ends. It is this group that wanted to assassinate Tokugawa Ieyasu. And if you don't stop them — they will succeed.





## BUSHIDO

**Bu•shi•do** ('bŭ-shi-,dō), *n.* 1. The samurai warrior must at all times follow the Bushido Code. This code of behavior demands that the samurai endure physical hardship without complaint, display complete loyalty to friends and rulers, and show bravery and selflessness above all.

**bush•i•ness** (boō-'nis), *n.* a bushy state or feeling; going



## Key Japanese Words

*bushido*: "the way of the warrior," this is the samurai warrior's traditional code of chivalry

*kimono*: a wide-sleeved robe

\* *ninja*: a shadow warrior

*rango*: a game in which people try to balance as many stones as they can on a single finger

*renga*: a form of Japanese poetry that eventually gave rise to *haiku*—poems consisting of lines of 5/7/5 syllables each, often about nature

\* *samurai*: a professional warrior who adheres to the Bushido Code

*shogun*: the leader of Japan

The Break took place during the SENGOKU (or "Warring States") period, when constant military conflict brought chaos to the country and the SQ did everything in their power to keep the nation divided. No strong leader emerged—but we think Tokugawa could have been the one to finally bring peace.

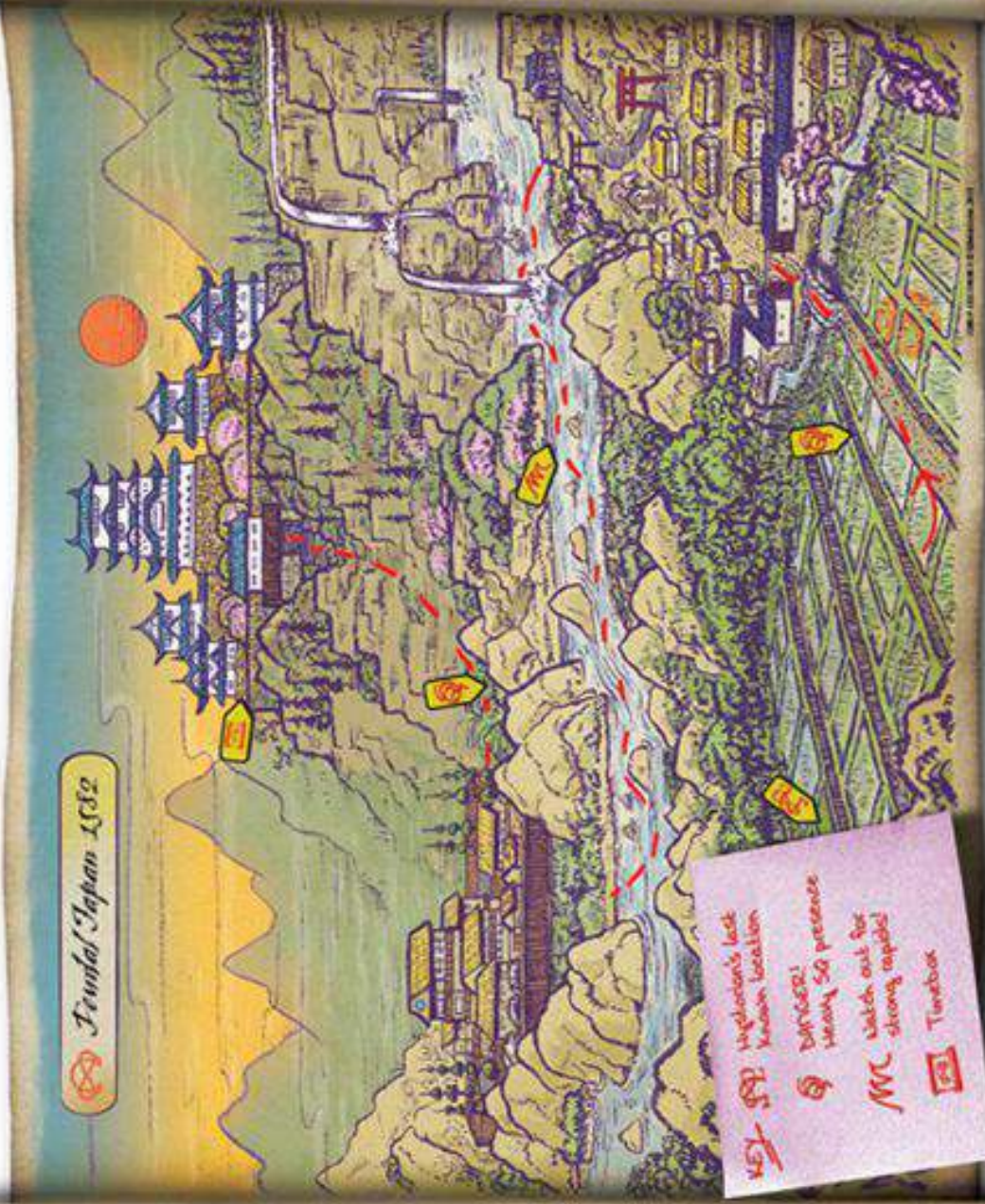
Samurai mansion.  
Cherry trees whisper secrets.  
A pottery shard.



A SHURIKEN (or Throwing star),  
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Feudal Japan 1582



KEY -> Miyamoto's last known location  
 DIFFICULT! Heavy SG presence  
MC Watch out for strong rapids  
 Tombok



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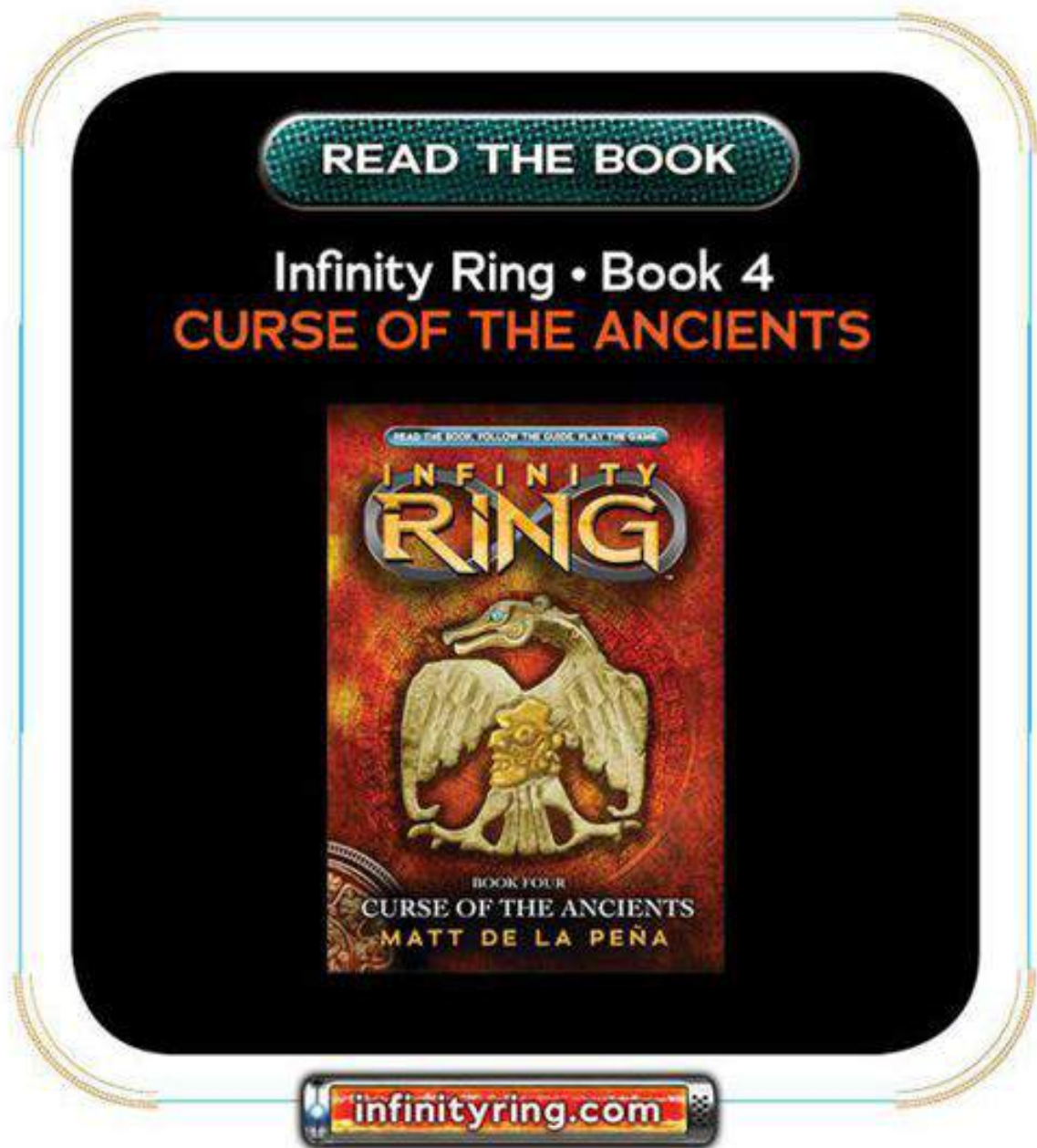
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Below is a sneak peek from Infinity Ring Book 4: *Curse of the Ancients* by Matt de la Peña.

## A Sleepless Night

RIQ STRAINED to keep a tight grip under both of Dak's arms as he helped carry him through the surging storm. Itchik and another man had his feet. He watched Sera hurrying alongside them, holding a blanket over Dak's face so he wouldn't drown in the falling rain. "Dak!" she kept shouting. "Can you hear me, Dak? It's Sera! Please look at me, Dak!"

But Dak wasn't looking at anyone.

He was out cold.

Riq had never seen anyone take such a nasty blow in his life.

As they moved past the temple, a sudden gust of wind knocked them all over into the mud. Riq and the two Mayan men scrambled to their feet, quickly lifting Dak back up and continuing away from the village, toward the hills on the outskirts of town. The women, children, and elders from the hut were several paces ahead already, holding on to one another, leaning into the teeth of the storm.

Riq winced as he slowly moved through the mud with Dak. His leg was killing him. He'd been struck in the knee by a falling board when the roof of the hut had collapsed. He wasn't sure how much longer he could go on. But every time he thought of asking for a rest, he would picture Dak pushing that little girl out of the way, taking the brunt of the wall's impact on his own head and back.

He'd saved her life.

Remembering this fact always gave Riq the shot of adrenaline he needed to fight through the pain and fatigue.

They carried Dak uphill over fallen trees, through knee-high puddles of rain, and across long stretches of quicksand-like mud. Eventually they approached the mouth of a large cave, where several Mayan warriors were perched on large boulders watching the storm.

Itchik shouted at the men, "Get Jasaw immediately! We must help this boy!"

Two of the warriors darted inside the cave. The rest leaped down from the boulders, into the rain, and helped carry Dak's limp body up to



the cave's broad opening.

Riq was relieved of his grip on Dak once they got inside. He watched Itchik and the others carry Dak across the dimly lit cave, Sera trailing closely behind. It took Riq's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dull candlelight, but once he could see, he was taken aback. Several hundred Mayas were spread out on blankets across the uneven floor of the cave. Some were sleeping. Others were sitting together in small groups, chanting. A few turned to look him over.

A man wearing a headdress pointed the men carrying Dak toward a large hanging blanket, set up like a screen for privacy. Riq knew this must be the man Itchik had referred to as Jasaw, and he hurried to catch up. When he ducked behind the blanket, he saw the men lowering Dak onto a cot. There were other patients on cots nearby. Riq was relieved they'd made it out of the storm, to a place where Dak might get help, and only now did he reach down to massage his aching knee. When he brought his fingers back up to his face, he saw blood. The board had cut him.

Riq moved toward Dak's cot, nodding to the men who had helped carry Dak as they left.

"Who are you anyway?" Sera was asking the man looking over Dak's wounds.

"I am Jasaw," he said without looking up. "The *ahmen*, medicine man, of our village. Your friend is very hurt."

"And how do *you* know how hurt he is?" Sera said. "It's not like you're a real doctor."

"What is 'doctor'?" Jasaw said, looking up at her.

Riq placed his hand on Sera's arm to try to calm her down. "How bad are his injuries?" he asked Jasaw.

The man turned his focus back to Dak and shook his head. He ran his hands lightly over Dak's face and neck, and then left them hovering over his eyes, as if he was trying to read something through his palms. Then he leaned an ear against Dak's chest. "Something has struck your friend on the head, yes?"

Riq and Sera both nodded.

"He is breathing normally, but I fear his brain may swell, which would be very bad." Riq watched the man grind up several different kinds of herbs, stir them into a liquid that looked like wine, and drip some of the concoction onto Dak's tongue. Then he rubbed his hands together and touched Dak's head and back. "No broken bones," he said.

“How do you know?” Sera said. “You don’t have an X-ray machine. You don’t have anything!”

“Sera,” Riq said. “He’s doing the best he can.”

“I have what I need,” Jasaw said.

Sera turned to Riq. “We have to get him to a hospital. Now.” Riq could see the fear flickering in Sera’s eyes.

“But Itchik says he’s the best,” Riq told her.

“The best what?” Sera said. “The best mystic?”

“Healer.”

“Dak needs a real doctor,” Sera said. “You saw that wall fall on him.”

Riq rubbed Sera’s shoulder. “We can’t chance warping out of here with Dak unconscious. You said it yourself: It’s getting harder and harder on our bodies. We have to wait until he’s stronger.”

Jasaw was now pushing his hands up Dak’s chest, toward his face.

“What are you doing?” Sera asked him.

“Ridding the body of evil spirits,” Jasaw said without looking up.

Sera shot Riq a desperate look. “I’m staying right here,” she said.

“All night. I’m making sure he takes care of Dak.”

Jasaw burned a plant-based incense over Dak’s body. The smell was strong. Riq knew Sera didn’t believe in anything spiritual like this. She believed in hard science. But this was Dak’s only hope.

He pictured what happened again. Dak rushing into the middle of the hut, pushing the girl to safety, the wall coming down on the back of his head. Riq leaned in close to Dak’s ear and said in a quiet voice that even Sera wouldn’t be able to hear, “You saved that girl’s life, Dak. You know that? You’re a hero.”

He kept waiting for Dak to open his eyes and say something sarcastic.

But he never did.

He just lay there, completely still, as Jasaw rubbed dark ash onto his forehead.





**Lisa McMann** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the paranormal Wake trilogy, the dystopian fantasy series The Unwanteds, and other books for teens and tweens. She lives with her husband, two kids, and two cats in Mesa, Arizona. Learn more at her website, [www.lisamcmann.com](http://www.lisamcmann.com).

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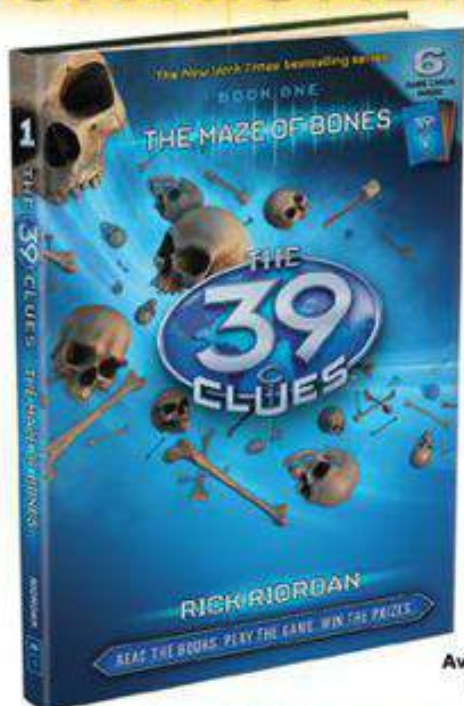
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

e-ISBN 978-0-545-48457-2

Cover illustration by Chris Nurse  
Cover design and illustrations by Keirsten Geise  
Back cover photography of characters by Michael Frost © Scholastic Inc.

First edition, February 2013

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012  
Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1  
Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141  
Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

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**Beneath the Ceiba Tree**

The Way of the Warrior Hystorian's Guide

Sneak Peek

About the Author

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EVERY OTHER time Sera has warped through history with Dak and Riq, it's happened in an instant. She gets sucked into a void, her stomach climbing up into her throat, her whole body shifting into floating particles, no longer a solid thing — it's beyond any roller-coaster free fall imaginable. And then, just before she gets sick, she opens her eyes in another time and place.

But this warp is not like the others.

Instead of time speeding up, it slows down.

And a wall lifts inside her mind.

She sees herself hurrying through flooding streets, out of breath, underneath a blistering twilight sky. Thick tornados ripping through neighborhoods in the distance. The bloodred sun hovering closer to Earth than seems possible, electrical surges shooting out from its core, making the swirling wind intolerably hot and sticky. Acid rain gushing down in slanted sheets. People leaning out of upper-story windows. All of them wide-eyed and screaming. Holding one another.

But Sera can't afford to stop and help.

She has to keep moving. Has to get where she's going before it's too late.

She is alone now, but she didn't come here alone. Ilsa was with her. Ilsa, her enemy. Sera left her behind where she had collapsed, left her with a promise to return. A promise to get them both to safety.

But not yet. Sera has something to do first.

The water rushing through the streets rises quickly until it's nearly head high, and Sera is forced to scale a fire escape where she shoves up

against a wall, sucking in breaths and looking all around her. The world is ending. Right before her eyes.

She spots a small motorized emergency raft tied to a looted fire truck. No one inside. She launches herself toward it, splashing into the water and swimming frantically. She hacks the rope in half with a switchblade, climbs in, and hot-wires the engine. In seconds she's speeding through intersection after intersection, steering herself around all the bodies floating facedown in the water. Some are children. Some, old people. She moves past men who squat alone on overturned cars, expressionless as zombies.

One man turns and looks Sera dead in the face as she veers around him, sending a chill down her spine. Because, in his lifeless eyes, she sees the truth of the Cataclysm.

It's not only the disintegration of the world, but the world's people, too.

That's when Sera realizes she's screaming. She's screaming and crying and gunning the raft, shouting at anyone within earshot, "Somebody help us! This can't be happening!"

But it is.

All around her, there are military trucks on their sides and old stubborn trees split down the middle and charred black, people flushed from their homes by the surging floods. Gaps are opening up in the Earth's crust, splitting roads in half, swallowing entire buildings, clusters of people reaching out for help, calling the names of loved ones who are no longer alive.

Sera zips past all of it, turning onto her childhood street.

She lets off the gas as she nears her house, then dives overboard and swim-walks her way up the flooded driveway, fearing the unspeakable horrors she's afraid she'll find inside, what will she find inside, what will she find . . .

Just as she reaches a trembling hand out for the doorknob, though, the memory slips away.



## Storm Warnings

SERA OPENED her eyes, shaking.

She was kneeling in clay-colored dirt, completely out of breath and clutching the Infinity Ring to her chest. The first thing she saw when she looked up was a short, dark-skinned woman dressed in a tunic-like *huipil*, holding a baby in each arm, hurrying past what looked to be some kind of ancient temple. A boy and a girl, both younger than Sera, ran by next, followed by a man wearing an elaborate headdress.

Sera turned to Dak and Riq. They were watching the same thing: dozens of people rushing past them, trying to get away from something.

But what?

Sera's heart still pounded inside her chest.

These trips through time were typically hard enough on her body, but this one had been different. It seemed to have shaken loose part of her repressed memory of the Cataclysm. During a previous mission, she'd taken an accidental trip to the future, which had given her a glimpse of the end of the world. When Sera came back, though, she was so traumatized by the experience she could only remember a few details, as if unconsciously protecting herself from what she knew she couldn't handle. So, technically, it hadn't been a lie when she told Dak and Riq she had nothing of interest to tell them about her warp without them.

Now that she remembered reaching for her door, though, she was desperate to recall what she had found inside her house. Why couldn't she remember?

Sera shook the Cataclysm from her mind for now and forced herself to take in her surroundings. The three of them were partially hidden



behind a row of trees. The sky was full of clouds. The air smelled clean, the way it sometimes did just before rain.

“Dude, why are you crying?”

Sera turned and found Dak staring at her. “I’m not crying,” she said, straightening her posture. “Why would I be crying?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” he said. “That’s kind of why I asked.”

Sera dismissed him with the wave of a hand and stood up, reaching for her face on the sly — sure enough, warm tears met the tips of her fingers. “I’m definitely not crying!” she snapped at her supposed best friend. “Maybe the time travel’s just getting harder on our bodies. Did you ever think about *that*, Dak?”

“It’s definitely getting harder on mine,” Riq said. He gave Sera a subtle nod that meant he had her back.

Dak stood up, too. “What time period are we in anyway? There are supposed to be Spanish conquistadores all over this place, right? And Franciscan monks. The Yucatán was crawling with those guys in 1562. All I see are scared-looking Mayas.”

Sera studied the people hurrying past the temple across from them. It was true, they were all Mayan. She looked down at the Infinity Ring. They were supposed to have landed in 1562. She was sure she’d programmed in the right coordinates.

“Who has the SQuare?” Riq asked.

Sera handed it to him, saying, “According to the display, we’re in Izamal. I don’t understand what I could’ve done wrong.”

She watched Riq study the screen, then step out from behind the trees to stop a passing boy. “Friend, please hold on for a second,” he said in a foreign popping tongue that Sera’s translation device had momentary trouble rendering into English. “Where is everyone going?”

The boy slowed. After looking the three time travelers up and down, he shouted, “The great storm is coming! Everyone must find shelter right away!”

The boy turned and hurried off.

Sera looked up along with Dak and Riq. The sky was full of gray clouds, sure, but it didn’t look like anything out of the ordinary. Definitely not a “great storm.” Then again, according to what she’d learned in school, the Maya were incredibly superstitious. Maybe something had gone wrong at one of their ceremonies.

Dak must've been thinking the same thing because he kept shaking his head. "Funny, I thought we would be the ones running for our lives." He turned to Riq and Sera, clearly readying himself for one of his infamous historical rants. "You *do* know that the Maya are considered a violent and hedonistic civilization, right? They sacrificed people, and they were always at war, and they ate the hearts of their own dead family members."

"Never read about any heart eating," Riq said.

"Okay, maybe not that last part, but —"

"That's enough, Dak," Sera said.

"What? Their big contribution to the world was that they wrote the Great Mayan Codex. And it's only considered great because it warned us of the curse, how our world is heading toward a massive Cataclysm —"

"And that our only hope was a group that would one day come along known as the SQ," Riq interrupted. "We've all read the same history books, Dak."

Sera cringed at the mention of the Cataclysm. She pictured herself reaching for the door of her house again. And then nothing. *Concentrate on the here and now*, she told herself, taking the SQuare back from Riq and rechecking their last series of instructions. They seemed straightforward enough. "Help the Maya. 1562." Then a series of coordinates for the Ring.

Dak tapped Sera on the arm and motioned toward Riq. "I liked it better when we hated this guy."

"We never hated him," Sera said.

"Speak for yourself."

"Believe me," Riq said. "The feeling was mutual."

"Maybe we should turn back the clock," Dak said. He elbowed Sera and gave her a big, goofy smile. "Get it? Turn back the clock?" He pointed at the Infinity Ring tucked safely back inside the satchel hanging from her belt.

"You truly are a child," Riq said.

"And you're a clown."

"Stop," Sera said. "Please. I need to think. If there are no conquistadores, like Dak said, maybe we really are in the wrong time. Because we're definitely in the correct geographical area."

"You really don't think we're in 1562?" Riq said.

“I don’t.” Sera looked back down at the Square. There had to be some scientific explanation for this. Science had never failed her before.

“There’s no way we’re in 1562,” Dak said. “All you have to do is look at that temple across the way. If it was 1562, it would have already been turned into a church. The first thing the Franciscans did when they arrived from Spain was modify the major temples into churches. They wanted to teach the locals there were other ways to live. I can’t believe you guys don’t know that!”

“Easy, Dak,” Sera said. “I’m not feeling real patient right now.”

Just then, the sky exploded in thunder directly above them.

A light rain began to fall.

Sera looked up, shielding her eyes with her free hand. The clouds seemed darker now. And the wind was beginning to stir. The Mayas continued hurrying past them along the sparkling white road into the distance.

“Take shelter!” a man shouted. “The great storm is coming.”

*What “great storm”?* Sera thought. And what did these people know about predicting the weather anyway? Back home, meteorologists only got it right about a third of the time, and they had the most up-to-date equipment known to man.

“Come on,” Riq said. “Let’s go find a place out of the rain. And we have to do something about these Japanese clothes.”

“It was fun being a samurai while it lasted,” Dak said sadly.

As they stepped out from behind the trees and started across the raised white road, Dak poked Sera in the shoulder. “It really did look like you were crying. Was it because the Ring took us to the wrong time?”

Sera shook her head and focused her eyes in front of her. She was done thinking about the Cataclysm. They had too much work to do.

“Did you have one of those Remnant things?”

“I wasn’t crying, Dak!” Sera snapped. “Just leave it alone already.”

“Jeez,” Dak said. “Bite my head off. Maybe I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

The sky lit up with lightning, followed by the crashing sound of more thunder. All three of them cowered as they ran.

Sera followed Dak and Riq behind a short row of stone huts, her mind slipping back to the horrible details of what she’d seen and heard of the Cataclysm. The sounds of screams over a chorus of never-ending sirens. The earth’s violent shifting under her feet every few minutes.

They had to fix the rest of the Breaks or else.  
And warping to the wrong time wasn't exactly a promising start.



## Fashionably Early

WHEN DAK saw Sera emerge from behind the sculpture-covered stone wall, he had to cover his mouth with a fist to stifle a laugh.

“What?” Sera said.

“Nothing,” Dak told her, launching into a fit of fake coughing.

She was dressed in a crazy-looking sack with a hole cut out for her head, as well as a long, colorful skirt that dragged in the dirt behind her when she walked. But the weirdest part was how closely she resembled one of them. The Mayas. Same skin color and high cheekbones. Same coarse, dark hair. If Sera wanted, she could probably pass for a local.

Now was not the time to bring it up, of course. They’d just downloaded a seemingly impossible riddle on the Square. And Dak had been best friends with Sera long enough to know when not to mess with her.

“Go on, Dak,” Sera said.

“I promise,” he told her. “It’s nothing.”

“Say it!” she demanded.

The look on her face told him she wasn’t going to drop it. “Okay, fine,” he said. “I was just thinking about . . . um, how nice of an outfit that is.”

“Like your loincloth is any better?” Sera said, pointing below his waist.

“It’s not a loincloth,” Dak said, instinctively covering himself. “It’s a breechcloth.” He looked down at the clothes Riq had swiped for him off of a tree near a cluster of empty huts. “And maybe your vision’s been compromised from all that crying you were doing back there, but I’m also clearly wearing pants —”

“More like leggings,” Sera said.

Dak turned to Riq for help. He was wearing the exact same outfit. But Riq was too busy peeking out from under the overhang that was keeping them out of the rain, watching the Mayas continuing to hurry past.

Dak sighed.

Sometimes it got lonely trying to rescue history all by himself.

“Can I see the riddle one more time?” Riq asked, turning back to the others.

Sera handed over the SQuare, and the three of them studied the nonsensical words for the tenth time:

*A snake charmer and a clown*

*A treasure that never was*

*A gift from the deity Itzamna: from 9.10.5.10.7 to 11.17.2.13.10*

*Trace the symbol of the ceiba tree toward the truth of the curse*

Dak threw his hands in the air. “Impossible!” He didn’t have the first idea how to approach it. And usually he was pretty good at working through the cryptic clues the Hystorians had left so they’d know which Break to fix.

“We have to make a decision,” Riq said, looking up at Dak and Sera. “We either search for a better place to wait out this rain, or we ignore it and concentrate on solving the riddle.”

“It’s not even a question,” Sera said. “We have to figure out where we should be and what we should be doing.”

“You think you can do it in these conditions?” Riq asked.

“I know I can. We’ve cracked number ciphers before.”

“Then let’s get to work.”

“Uh, guys?” Dak said. “Excuse me?” When they’d both turned to face him, he said, “Don’t you think I should maybe have some say in this, too?”

“What is it, Dak?” Sera asked.

“Well, it’s been awhile since we’ve eaten, right? I mean, technically it’s been several hundred years.”

Sera rolled her eyes. “And your point is?”

Dak motioned to Riq. “What do you say we send this guy off to find us a nice cheese plate? I’m thinking Gruyère and cheddar. Maybe a few

figs and grapes on the side. Oh, and saltines.”

Sera’s mouth fell open. “Are you kidding me right now, Dak?”

“Fine, nix the saltines,” Dak said. “I get it: You’re in the mood for something a bit classier. Let’s go ahead and spring for TriSQuits, then.”

“An absolute child,” Riq said, shaking his head.

Sera and Riq both turned away from Dak and began tinkering with the Square. “Seriously, though,” Dak called to them, “aren’t you guys hungry?”

They ignored him.

Dak watched them work for a few minutes. Sera obviously knew what she was doing. She was a genius when it came to science, so working with numbers came somewhat naturally to her. And as a language whiz, Riq had an advantage over Dak whenever their clues involved codes or ciphers. Knowing that didn’t make it any easier to be benched, though.

“Whatever,” Dak muttered under his breath.

He wandered a few yards down the stone wall and sat against it, watching the rain and thinking about the riddle. A snake charmer. A clown. A treasure that never was. The truth of the curse. None of it rang any bells.

Being left alone like this reminded Dak of what got them into this history-saving situation in the first place. Just a few days ago — Wait, how was he supposed to measure days while traveling through time? He couldn’t exactly consult a modern calendar. And the Mayan version wouldn’t do him any good.

However long ago it was, the last time they were back home, in the present, he’d mistakenly let Sera into his parents’ lab, where she had become obsessed with the Infinity Ring, ignoring him for hours and hours and hours — just like she was ignoring him now. Dak shook his head, thinking about that fateful day. If he’d never shown her what his parents were working on, Sera never would’ve figured out the missing piece of the puzzle. And if she hadn’t figured out the missing piece of the puzzle, they never would’ve taken that stupid test run back to the Revolutionary War, and his parents wouldn’t be lost somewhere in time right now.

Dak watched several more Mayas race down the white street, carrying their children in their arms. It was a strange sight considering

the rain was hardly more than a lazy drizzle, though the wind was definitely picking up now.

Dak leaned his head back against the wall, fingering the iron key he had tucked into the side of his leggings. His parents had given it to him in the year 911, somehow knowing that he would need it to escape the SQ in 1850. It boggled his mind.

Dak squeezed his eyes shut, tightened his grip on the key, and imagined their faces. He understood that what he, Sera, and Riq were doing was monumentally important. They were literally trying to save the world. And he loved warping back to different parts of history, seeing famous events unfold right before his eyes. But lately, in secret, Dak wondered if he wouldn't ditch all the heroics in exchange for having his mom and dad back in his life — even for a day.

These thoughts made Dak feel guilty, so he got up and hustled back over to Sera and Riq, saying, “Never fear, my fellow time-traveling comrades, I've come to save the day. Please, how might my talents best be utilized?”

They didn't even acknowledge his existence.

“Guys?”

Nothing.

Dak shrugged. If they didn't need him, he didn't need them either.

He turned to go and explore the wet Mayan village on his own. If he was lucky, he'd find some vital clue to the riddle . . . which he wouldn't share with anyone.



Dak found himself crossing back over the white road, toward a large domed building a little ways off. It looked like an observatory. He cupped a hand against his forehead to keep the rain out of his eyes. It was so hot and humid he was almost thankful to be wearing a breechcloth. It was actually keeping him fairly cool and allowed for occasional drafts that proved tremendously refreshing. What if he started rocking one of these bad boys in the present? Would it catch on? He pictured all his bros in fifth grade wearing them, too. Sitting around the caf, talking. Lining up for assemblies. Eventually they'd run a nice profile piece on him in the school paper next to the caption *Dak Smyth, more than your ordinary history genius.*

Then he remembered one very important fact:

He didn't really have any bros.



Unless he counted Sera — which he decided he did.

Dak tried all the doors of the observatory, but they were locked. He was surprised by the size of the building. According to his research on Mesoamerican civilizations, the Maya were curious about astrology. And art. And music. But they didn't have the technology for anything overly refined — for instance, they probably weren't spreading their cheese onto TriSQuits.

Thunder crashed so loud overhead, Dak flinched. The rain started falling harder, too, and at an odd angle.

Dak knew he should hurry back to the others, get out of the brewing storm, but just then he spotted a narrow opening in the observatory wall, like a small glassless window. He moved toward it and peered inside, the rain raking down his back. It was dark inside, except for a few candles that burned near the far wall of the large room. Next to this wall, which had a large painting of a tree, were three older men kneeling on the floor, writing on a massive sheet of a paper-like material. The thing was longer than they were tall.

Then, on the floor beside them, Dak spotted something else. A colorful mask. The kind a clown might wear. Dak immediately thought of the riddle. Maybe there was some kind of connection. And then Dak considered something else. Something potentially incredible. What if these men were working on the Great Mayan Codex? He knew there were probably many codices, a type of book, produced during this era. But his heart sped up anyway. Because everything around him made him think he was in the seventh century. And that meant it was possible that he was witnessing the composition of one of the most revered texts in all of history.

Dak pounded on the wall, so excited he was having trouble breathing. As soon as the men looked up, though, he thought better of it and ducked out of sight. Because if the authors of the Great Mayan Codex had prophesized that the SQ would one day come along and save all mankind, it was possible that the authors themselves were SQ. Or even a group of Time Wardens, whom the SQ had positioned throughout history to protect their agenda from meddling time travelers . . . like Dak.

He crouched there for several long minutes, trying to think.

Rain pummeled his entire body, puddling around his knees and elbows.

He finally pushed away from the observatory and sprinted back across the road. He had to go tell Riq and Sera about the clown mask. And the codex. Even if they didn't deserve to know.



When Dak finally rounded the stone wall and spotted his friends, he stopped in his tracks. “No,” he said under his breath.

Riq and Sera were surrounded by three thuggish-looking Mayas, one of whom was holding the Infinity Ring in his grimy hands.



## Storm Relief

THE RAIN was pounding down so hard against the thin, metallic overhang, Riq was having trouble hearing the man standing directly in front of him. “I’m sorry, Itchik,” he interrupted. “How far did you say your home is from here?”

As the man was answering, Riq caught a small blur racing toward them out of the corner of his eye. He turned to get a better look, and mumbled under his breath, “Dak?”

“Nobody messes with my friends!” Dak shouted just before launching himself at the man holding the Infinity Ring. They both fell to the ground, and the Ring went flying through the air. Riq instinctively dove out into the rain to try to catch it, but the Ring landed just beyond his reach with a thud.

“The Ring!” Sera screamed.

Riq quickly scooped it up and looked it over. It was slightly dented on one side and muddy. The screen was blank. He watched Sera position herself between Dak and the man he’d just attacked. “What in the name of mincemeat do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

“Protecting you guys,” Dak said.

“*Protecting* us? From what?”

“These Mayan Time Wardens!” Dak pointed at the three men.

Sera slapped a hand against her forehead.

Riq ducked back under the overhang, dripping wet. “They came out here to help us, not hurt us!” he shouted at Dak over the storm. “Itchik here was just offering to lead us to shelter.”

“And how do you know it’s not a trap?” Dak shouted back.

Itchik turned to Riq with a look of confusion. “What does the small boy mean ‘a trap’?”

Riq sighed. “Honestly, it’s best if you just ignore the small boy,” he said.

Violent thunder echoed through the entire village.

“The storm!” one of the other Mayan men shouted over the increasing winds. “It is nearing the village! We must go inside immediately!”

“Please,” Itchik said. “Come with us.”

Riq handed the Ring back to Sera, who looked it over. “Well, let’s hope it still works,” she said, slipping it back into her satchel.

Riq and Sera were both staring at Dak.

“What?” he said.



The noise of the storm made it impossible to communicate.

Everyone kept quiet as the Mayas led Riq, Sera, and Dak through the bustling village. Many people seemed to be headed in the opposite direction, which worried Riq. Maybe they were following the wrong men. But when they stopped in front of an especially large stone hut, he saw other groups of Mayan families hunkering down in neighboring huts, too.

Itchik and his men quickly unlatched the front door and stepped inside, motioning for Riq and the others to enter.

“But we’re sopping wet,” Riq said, indicating his dripping, muddy clothes and the puddles forming around his feet.

“This does not matter,” Itchik said. “Please, you must join us inside.”

As they wrung out their clothes by the door, Riq peered around the inside of the hut. He trusted Itchik and his friends, but he also couldn’t shake the memory of what had happened in 1850, when SQ slave traders had masqueraded as Hystorian allies. His eyes went immediately to a cluster of Mayas huddled together in the middle of the room, singing. Based on the lyrics, Riq gathered that their song was directed at some type of rain god. He studied their faces, which showed both fear and awe for the storm.

A girl around his age suddenly turned and met his eyes. She was still singing with everyone else, but he noticed a slight raise at the corners of her mouth. This subtle smile made him feel that he was safe inside the

hut. But it also made him feel something else. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

The girl turned back to the group just as Dak whispered, "Guys, listen to me. I don't think they're Time Wardens."

Sera patted him on the back. "Whatever gives you that idea, Dak? Is it because that's what we just told you outside? Or is it the fact that they basically rescued us from a tropical storm?"

"And brought us into their home," Riq added.

Dak frowned at Riq and turned back to Sera. "Look, I'm sorry I damaged the Ring, okay? But I saw these guys huddled around you, and one of them was holding the Ring, and I just sort of freaked."

Sera sighed. "Don't worry, we'll fix it," she said. "I'll fix it."

"At least I figured out what time we're in," Dak said. "Approximately. We're definitely in the seventh century, not 1562. We were off by less than a millennium."

"That part is my fault," Sera whispered. "Although I'm not sure what I did wrong."

"I'm still not convinced landing here was a mistake," Riq replied. "Maybe there's something important happening here, too. Like, what if this storm is somehow connected to the riddle?"

"Oh, oh, oh." Dak was suddenly so excited he was jumping up and down. "I meant to tell you guys. I saw something important inside the observatory. You won't believe this. Seriously."

"Go on," Sera said. "Spit it out."

But before Dak could say another word, Itchik clapped his hands together and called to them. "Friends, please join us in our small ceremony. We are asking the gods not to wash away our crops. And for a safe passage here for our neighbors from Calakmul, who are to come and study our discoveries."

Riq motioned for Sera and Dak to follow him toward the middle of the room. As they walked, Dak said softly, "I'll tell you guys about the observatory later. It could be part of the riddle, though. Also, I have a new theory about these people. I think they might be Hystorians."

"They're not Hystorians," Riq said, turning around.

"How do you know?"

"We sort of asked them already," Sera said. "Indirectly, of course."

Dak shook his head. "No, I definitely think they're Hystorians. Why else would they be so much nicer than the history books portray them?"

Riq tuned out of the rest of Dak and Sera's whispered conversation. He was too busy testing a theory of his own. He stared at the Mayan girl who had smiled at him, willing her to turn and look at him one more time. He needed to see how he reacted.

It took a few seconds, but she finally did turn to him, still singing, and looked directly into his eyes. And she gave him another smile, too — a real one this time.

Riq's suspicions were confirmed.

The second their eyes locked, that strange feeling returned to his stomach. It was almost like a Remnant, but better, somehow. A good kind of queasiness. What did it mean? Whatever the answer, it was unlike anything Riq had ever felt before.



## The Wrath of Chaac

WHILE EVERYONE else was chanting to the Mayan rain deity, Chaac, Sera was quietly experiencing the most profound Remnant of her entire life. Her stomach was twisted in knots. She clenched her teeth and cringed at the familiar iron taste flooding her mouth. She felt so dizzy she had to plant both hands firmly on the dirt floor next to where she sat.

Dak and Riq were totally unaware. They'd just been taught the simple refrain and had joined the Mayas in their chanting. The man who called himself Itchik was the only one who seemed to notice Sera's distress. Thankfully, he wasn't calling attention to it.

Sera was all too familiar with Remnants — the feeling that something was missing, that if history had unfolded in a slightly different way she'd be living her real life instead of this shadow version. Back home, she'd often walk past her barn and suddenly be overwhelmed by the sense that her parents, who she'd never known, were inside, tending to a trio of beautiful Thoroughbreds. But when she pulled open the door, she'd find the barn completely empty.

Her Remnants had grown stronger since they started traveling through time, but this was by far the most powerful one she had experienced. She took deep, even breaths, wondering why now. During a storm. Surrounded by Mayas.

When the Remnant finally passed, Sera let out a relieved sigh and resumed halfheartedly mouthing the chant with everyone else. She noted how intensely the storm was hammering down on the roof above them, the sound echoing throughout the cavernous hut. She studied the worried look on all the faces around her. The storm was much more severe than

she had thought it would be — though it was nothing compared to what she remembered of the Cataclysm.

After a few more minutes, Itchik raised a hand and the chanting ceased.

“Young visitors from a faraway place,” he said, “I would like to welcome you to our village and introduce you to my people.” He proceeded to rattle off several Mayan names that Sera knew she’d never remember — especially on the heels of such a powerful Remnant. There were three separate Mayan families, each with several children. There were a few stooped elders, too. The only name that stuck in Sera’s head was “Kisa,” the girl who was a few years older than Sera and very pretty.

Itchik turned to his people and said, “And this is Riq, Sera, and . . . I’m sorry, I don’t believe I ever learned the name of the smaller boy.”

“I’m not that small!” Dak fired back.

“It’s a pleasure meeting everyone,” Riq blurted out.

Sera leaned over to Dak and whispered, “Try to keep in mind that if it wasn’t for them, we’d be out there getting pummeled by this storm.”

Dak turned to Itchik. “The name’s Dak Smyth, sir dude.”

“Very good,” Itchik said. “My family and I would like to welcome all of you to our home.”

“Welcome,” everyone else said together.

One of the women unpacked a small stack of asymmetrical tortilla-looking things and passed them out to everyone. Sera didn’t realize how hungry she was until she started eating the corn-based bread.

Minutes later, there was a loud crashing sound on the roof, and everyone looked up. “What was that?” the girl named Kisa said.

“The storm still grows,” one of the elders explained. “Trees are now blowing over.”

Two small girls began to cry quietly and ducked under the arms of their mother.

“Don’t be scared,” the elder said. “Chaac is looking over us.”

Itchik turned to Sera, Dak, and Riq and said, “From where have you traveled, friends? You certainly don’t look like our neighbors to the north or south.” He paused for a second and pointed at Sera. “With the exception of the girl.”

“I’m definitely not your neighbor,” she snapped.

Riq shot her a look.



Sera shrugged. Even Riq would have to admit that associating her with the Maya didn't make sense. And back in second grade, during a lesson on lost civilizations, stupid Sylvia Walker had drawn a stick figure of a girl sitting on top of a Mayan temple next to the caption *Sera's great-great-great-grandmother*. The kids all laughed and asked if her mom packed a thermos full of goat blood in her lunch.

There was a reason Sera was so sensitive.

"Where are we from?" Dak echoed. He had a big grin on his face, which told Sera she should be extremely worried. "That's an interesting question, Itchy."

"Itchik," Riq corrected.

Dak winked at Sera and Riq and turned back to the Mayan man.

"We come from a place far, far away. . . . I believe you know what I'm saying."

"The remote highlands?" Itchik asked.

"Dak," Sera said, shooting him a dirty look. "We've already discussed this —"

"Let me put it another way," Dak said, ignoring her. "You know your fancy calendar?"

"Ah, one of the great achievements of our ancestors," Itchik said.

"Yeah, well, we've just about made it to the end of that bad boy."

Sera looked to Riq, who let his head fall into his hands.

Itchik was staring at Dak, a confused look on his face.

"Where do we come from?" Dak said. "Let's just say it's a place where people consider *these* things a little outdated." He pointed down at his breechcloth.

"Seriously, Dak," Sera tried again. "Drop it. Please." Dak couldn't seem to get it through his thick head that not everyone they met was going to be a Hystorian or Time Warden.

Dak only grinned at Sera and turned back to Itchik. "I'm talking about the future, Itchy. Where people drive cars and fly planes and eat tortillas that are actually symmetrical. Filled with grated cheese. I'm talking about quesadillas, my friend."

Sera rolled her eyes. She glanced at Riq, who threw his hands in the air.

"I don't understand what your friend is saying," Itchik said, turning to them.

"Neither does he," Sera answered. "Please, just ignore —"

“Do I really have to spell this thing out for everybody?” Dak interrupted. “You guys are *Hy-stor-i-ans*. And we’ve traveled here from the *fu-ture*. Go on, Sera. Show him the Infinity Ring again and explain how it works. Riq, pull the riddle up on the SQuare. I can’t believe I have to broker this whole thing myself.”

“What’s a Hystorian?” Kisa asked.

Everyone was staring at Dak, completely baffled, including Sera and Riq.

Even the smallest Mayan baby was staring at him.

The grin on Dak’s face slowly fell away and he turned to Sera. “Wait, is it possible that they’re not actually Hystorians?”

Before Sera could answer there was a second tremendous crashing sound from up above. Sera looked up and saw that the wooden slats were actually being pulled from the roof and carried away in the powerful winds. Rain started streaming down into the hut, scattering everyone. The children screamed, and their parents covered their small heads and hurried them to the far wall, away from the widening hole.

Sera, Dak, and Riq ran to the opposite corner.

“The storm is too vicious!” Riq shouted. “The entire roof will come down!”

Sera looked up. She saw more wood being torn away. Uneven chunks of rock came crashing down into the hut. “We can’t stay here!” she shouted. But when she tried to get up, Riq held her by the wrist.

“We need to stick together!” he shouted.

There was so much commotion inside the disintegrating hut, Sera couldn’t think. Rain poured down all around them. The wind howled. Children wailed. A thick tree branch fell from above, slamming into the earth only inches in front of Sera’s face.

“Watch out!” Dak suddenly shouted.

Sera thought he was shouting at her, but when she looked up she saw a little Mayan girl standing alone near the front door of the hut, crying, as that part of the wall started caving in. Before Sera could even think to move, Dak sprang to his feet and raced toward the girl. He shoved her out of harm’s way, toward her mom, just as the wall collapsed, cracking him in the back of the head and driving him into the ground.

“Dak!” Sera screamed.

She sprinted over to him, slid down to her knees, and lifted his face. He was trapped under the rubble of the stone wall, and his eyes were

huge with fear. There was already blood caked in his hair, running in slick lines down his neck and shoulders.

“Dak!” she shouted again. “Dak, please! Can you hear me?”

“The observatory,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“The people writing inside,” he said, blinking his eyes and swallowing. “See them. It could be part of the riddle.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Sera pleaded.

Riq was beside them now, too.

“Stay with me, Dak!” Sera shouted. “Just stay with me!”

But Dak’s eyes slowly rolled into the back of his head.

He lost consciousness.



## A Sleepless Night

RIQ STRAINED to keep a tight grip under both of Dak's arms as he helped carry him through the surging storm. Itchik and another man had his feet. He watched Sera hurrying alongside them, holding a blanket over Dak's face so he wouldn't drown in the falling rain. "Dak!" she kept shouting. "Can you hear me, Dak? It's Sera! Please look at me, Dak!"

But Dak wasn't looking at anyone.

He was out cold.

Riq had never seen anyone take such a nasty blow in his life.

As they moved past the temple, a sudden gust of wind knocked them all over into the mud. Riq and the two Mayan men scrambled to their feet, quickly lifting Dak back up and continuing away from the village, toward the hills on the outskirts of town. The women, children, and elders from the hut were several paces ahead already, holding on to one another, leaning into the teeth of the storm.

Riq winced as he slowly moved through the mud with Dak. His leg was killing him. He'd been struck in the knee by a falling board when the roof of the hut had collapsed. He wasn't sure how much longer he could go on. But every time he thought of asking for a rest, he would picture Dak pushing that little girl out of the way, taking the brunt of the wall's impact on his own head and back.

He'd saved her life.

Remembering this fact always gave Riq the shot of adrenaline he needed to fight through the pain and fatigue.

They carried Dak uphill over fallen trees, through knee-high puddles of rain, and across long stretches of quicksand-like mud. Eventually they

approached the mouth of a large cave, where several Mayan warriors were perched on large boulders watching the storm.

Itchik shouted at the men, “Get Jasaw immediately! We must help this boy!”

Two of the warriors darted inside the cave. The rest leaped down from the boulders, into the rain, and helped carry Dak’s limp body up to the cave’s broad opening.

Riq was relieved of his grip on Dak once they got inside. He watched Itchik and the others carry Dak across the dimly lit cave, Sera trailing closely behind. It took Riq’s eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dull candlelight, but once he could see, he was taken aback. Several hundred Mayas were spread out on blankets across the uneven floor of the cave. Some were sleeping. Others were sitting together in small groups, chanting. A few turned to look him over.

A man wearing a headdress pointed the men carrying Dak toward a large hanging blanket, set up like a screen for privacy. Riq knew this must be the man Itchik had referred to as Jasaw, and he hurried to catch up. When he ducked behind the blanket, he saw the men lowering Dak onto a cot. There were other patients on cots nearby. Riq was relieved they’d made it out of the storm, to a place where Dak might get help, and only now did he reach down to massage his aching knee. When he brought his fingers back up to his face, he saw blood. The board had cut him.

Riq moved toward Dak’s cot, nodding to the men who had helped carry Dak as they left.

“Who are you anyway?” Sera was asking the man looking over Dak’s wounds.

“I am Jasaw,” he said without looking up. “The *ahmen*, medicine man, of our village. Your friend is very hurt.”

“And how do *you* know how hurt he is?” Sera said. “It’s not like you’re a real doctor.”

“What is ‘doctor’?” Jasaw said, looking up at her.

Riq placed his hand on Sera’s arm to try to calm her down. “How bad are his injuries?” he asked Jasaw.

The man turned his focus back to Dak and shook his head. He ran his hands lightly over Dak’s face and neck, and then left them hovering over his eyes, as if he was trying to read something through his palms. Then

he leaned an ear against Dak's chest. "Something has struck your friend on the head, yes?"

Riq and Sera both nodded.

"He is breathing normally, but I fear his brain may swell, which would be very bad." Riq watched the man grind up several different kinds of herbs, stir them into a liquid that looked like wine, and drip some of the concoction onto Dak's tongue. Then he rubbed his hands together and touched Dak's head and back. "No broken bones," he said.

"How do you know?" Sera said. "You don't have an X-ray machine. You don't have anything!"

"Sera," Riq said. "He's doing the best he can."

"I have what I need," Jasaw said.

Sera turned to Riq. "We have to get him to a hospital. Now." Riq could see the fear flickering in Sera's eyes.

"But Itchik says he's the best," Riq told her.

"The best what?" Sera said. "The best mystic?"

"Healer."

"Dak needs a real doctor," Sera said. "You saw that wall fall on him."

Riq rubbed Sera's shoulder. "We can't chance warping out of here with Dak unconscious. You said it yourself: It's getting harder and harder on our bodies. We have to wait until he's stronger."

Jasaw was now pushing his hands up Dak's chest, toward his face.

"What are you doing?" Sera asked him.

"Ridding the body of evil spirits," Jasaw said without looking up.

Sera shot Riq a desperate look. "I'm staying right here," she said. "All night. I'm making sure he takes care of Dak."

Jasaw burned a plant-based incense over Dak's body. The smell was strong. Riq knew Sera didn't believe in anything spiritual like this. She believed in hard science. But this was Dak's only hope.

He pictured what happened again. Dak rushing into the middle of the hut, pushing the girl to safety, the wall coming down on the back of his head. Riq leaned in close to Dak's ear and said in a quiet voice that even Sera wouldn't be able to hear, "You saved that girl's life, Dak. You know that? You're a hero."

He kept waiting for Dak to open his eyes and say something sarcastic.

But he never did.

He just lay there, completely still, as Jasaw rubbed dark ash onto his forehead.



Riq tried sleeping on the blanket Itchik set out for him, but he was unable to shut off his mind. He kept picturing the stone wall coming down on Dak and the cryptic riddle they'd pulled up on the Square. He also thought about his time on the run in 1850. He'd been able to keep a young boy, James, out of the hands of slave traders. Why was he so helpless now?

Eventually, he gave up on sleep. He walked quietly over to the cave opening and sat on a boulder to watch the powerful storm. The rain still poured down on the beautiful green Mayan landscape. The wind still whipped through the trees. But the thunder and lightning seemed more distant now, which told Riq the worst of it had passed.

Riq had always been intrigued by natural disasters. In an odd way, sometimes he even found himself rooting for storms and earthquakes and tornados. It's not that he wanted to see anyone get hurt, and he knew the increased frequency of these disasters was a direct result of the SQ creating Breaks in history — the Breaks he, Dak, and Sera were busy trying to correct. But he always thought that maybe the right disaster would come along and hit the SQ where it hurt, compromising their political power. Maybe it would be like hitting the RESET button on the world.

But there was a non-SQ-related reason he was so fascinated by disasters, too. A reason nobody who knew him would ever suspect. Secretly, Riq sometimes wanted to hit the RESET button on his own life.

For as long as he could remember, he'd worked tirelessly to be the best at everything he did. School, soccer, language acquisition, The Art of Memory . . . At first it was fun, and the praise he received made him feel special. But somewhere along the line, things shifted. The fun faded. The pressure to stay on top started weighing down on his shoulders. He put in all those extra hours not because he was enjoying himself, but because he was afraid to fail. Lately, he had been having an awful recurring nightmare where Brint and Mari followed him around, shaking their heads in disappointment. His classmates spoke in hushed voices about him getting only an A minus.

Riq was watching the pouring rain, dreaming about living a normal life where he'd sleep in on weekends and hang out at the mall, when he

heard footsteps creeping up behind him.

He spun around quickly, instinctively popping to his feet.

It was Kisa.

“Hey,” she said, grinning at his military move.

“Hey,” Riq said back, slowly unclenching his fists.

“I can’t sleep either.” She was holding a small wooden box in her right hand. “I keep thinking about what happened to your friend. I’m really sorry.”

Riq nodded.

“Jasaw is a gifted healer, though. He’ll make sure your friend has the best care.”

“Thanks,” Riq said. He searched his mind for something else to say. But he didn’t have any experience talking to girls like Kisa so he sort of just stood there awkwardly, looking at her.

“What about you?” she said. “How’s your knee?”

He furrowed his brow, confused. “How’d you know I hurt my knee?”

She switched the wooden box from her right hand to her left. “I saw you limping while you were carrying your friend. And then in the cave you were rubbing it. You should really tell Jasaw what happened.”

“I’ll be okay,” Riq said. “It’s just a cut.” He looked at her for a few long seconds trying to think of something else to say, something that would keep her out here with him, but his mind felt sluggish and his stomach had that weird feeling again.

“Mind if I sit out here for a bit?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, a little too excitedly. “I mean, no, I don’t mind — yes, you can sit.” He felt heat rising into his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

Kisa sat on the boulder next to his and set down her wooden box.

“What’s in there?” Riq asked.

“Jewelry,” she said. “I figured if I was going to have a sleepless night, I might as well get some work done.”

Riq watched her remove a small block of wood and a knife and start whittling.

“My mother says it’s a man’s job to make artistic things,” she said. “But I know my jewelry’s as good as any man’s, if not better.” She looked up at Riq. “I hate that there are things girls aren’t supposed to be good at. Who says?”

Kisa pulled a metal piece out of her box and held it up for Riq to see.



He took the bracelet and turned it over in his hands. “Wow,” he said. It was shaped like a thin, coiled snake. Each scale was meticulously crafted, as were the eyes and tongue. It was as well constructed as any piece of jewelry he’d seen in the modern world. “I’m impressed,” he told her, handing back the snake.

Kisa smiled and put it away. “Can I ask you something, Riq? I’ve been wondering about it all night.”

“Of course,” he said.

“What’s a Hystorian?”

He studied her dark brown eyes. During training back home, his supervisors drilled into him the importance of guarding Hystorian intel. Even the daily cafeteria menu was password protected. But Riq was weary from all the time travel. And the storm. And what had happened to Dak. He needed to talk to someone.

So he did.

He told Kisa about the SQ and Aristotle’s theory about the Great Breaks. He explained how the world was thrown off balance every time history had been altered by the SQ, causing strange occurrences all over, far worse than this storm. He told her Hystorians were people stationed throughout time, trained to look out for the time travelers Aristotle predicted would one day show up from the future to try to fix history and save the world.

When he finished, Kisa looked at him for a long time before saying, “So you three really are from the future? Like your friend said?”

Riq knew he’d said too much already. He expected this to make him feel tremendously guilty, but it didn’t. For whatever reason, he trusted Kisa.

“It’s okay,” she said. “You don’t have to answer that.” She went back to whittling away at her piece of wood.

Riq could now see what she was carving. A snake rising up out of a basket. “Can I ask you a question now, Kisa?”

She nodded.

“Did you live in the hut that was destroyed?”

“No,” she said. “But I spent a lot of time there. My uncle Itchik lived there with his family.”

“How will he fix it? And where will everyone live in the meantime?”

“Someone will take them in,” she said. “We all look out for one another in my village.”

They talked for a while longer, mostly about Kisa's family and her village. Riq was moved by how much they cared for one another. And how much they respected the land. They seemed far different from the way they were presented in history classes. And he was surprised to find out that Itchik was no ordinary man. He was the king of Izamal. Had been for years.

Then they sat together in silence, Kisa whittling and Riq watching the rain soften and the dark slowly lose its grip on the sky. It felt nice sitting beside her without talking. He didn't feel awkward anymore.

Eventually, Kisa packed up her things and stood and wished Riq a good night. But she didn't leave right away. She just stood there, watching the quiet rainfall for a few moments. "One day," she finally said, turning to Riq, "I want to do something special, too."

"I bet you will," he said.

She smiled, then turned and walked back into the cave.

It wasn't until Kisa was long gone that Riq noticed she'd left the snake bracelet on the boulder where she'd been sitting. He was about to scoop it up and hurry after her, but then he saw the message she'd carved into the rock. He stared at the glyphs for several seconds. He was one of the few Hystorians who could decipher Mayan writing, but it wasn't easy. Eventually, he was able to read: *For my new friend, Riq.*

He slipped the bracelet onto his wrist, feeling a wave of excitement pass through his body. He lifted the piece of jewelry up to his eyes to study the details of the metallic snake — and then a thought suddenly occurred to him.

What if Kisa was the snake charmer from the riddle?



## The Symbol of the Ceiba Tree

SERA CONTINUED down the hill beside Riq, overcome with guilt about leaving Dak's side. Her best friend still hadn't regained consciousness, and she wanted to be the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes. And who knew what crazy potion that mystic might try without her supervision? But when Riq had stirred her from a restless sleep, he reminded her of Dak's last words about the people inside the observatory. The least they could do, he reasoned, was honor their friend's wishes by checking it out.

So here Sera was.

Trekking down to the observatory.

The guilt tightening like a noose around her neck with each step she took away from the cave.

"I mean, just look at it," Riq continued. "It's incredible what Kisa was able to do without the help of modern tools."

"Wow, it really is," Sera said, rolling her eyes. Riq hadn't stopped talking about Kisa and his new bracelet since they started their walk. He'd already explained his theory about her being the snake charmer from the riddle. He believed she might hold the key to discovering the Break they needed to fix. He described for Sera the deep conversation he'd had with Kisa, which had lasted into the morning. Now he was obsessing over the artistic merits of the bracelet she'd given him. Riq was so caught up in Kisa talk, he didn't even seem to notice all the storm damage they were passing. The thick tree branches strewn all over the dirt path. The massive reddish brown puddles and blown-off roofs. The smaller huts on the outskirts of the village that had been completely flattened.

“And it’s surprisingly comfortable,” Riq said, spinning the bracelet around his wrist for Sera to see. “I never thought of myself as a bracelet-wearing kind of guy, but this thing’s a different deal. I really dig it.”

“I’m sure you do.” Sera hadn’t known Riq long, but she was willing to go out on a limb and say he was acting out of character. Not that she had time to worry about Riq’s character at the moment. Her focus was on getting to the observatory, finding out whatever it was they were supposed to find out, then getting back up to the cave to check on Dak.

When Sera looked up a few minutes later, her eyes grew big and she stopped in her tracks. The observatory.

Riq turned around. “I bet Kisa would make you something, too, if \_\_\_”

“Look!” Sera interrupted, pointing ahead of them. Yesterday the observatory had been nearly as tall as the temple. Now Sera was staring at a heap of rubble.

“The storm,” Riq said under his breath.

Sera’s body went cold. Most of the roof had been stripped away. The walls were folded in on one another and crumbling near the base. A dozen men, including Itchik, were standing on top of the wreckage, calling out names and carrying debris away, stone by stone.

Sera and Riq took off running down the hill.



Sera quickly learned that there were three elders trapped inside: Cocom, Kan Boar, and Pacal. They were the reason everyone was working at such a frantic pace. Itchik kept calling out their names and digging through the rubble, trying to determine the location of the voices that occasionally echoed back. Sera and Riq worked right alongside the Mayas.

Initially, there were a dozen Mayan men helping out. Then two dozen. Then three. All of them hoisted boulders nearly as big as their own bodies. Women started pitching in. Older children. By late afternoon there were over two hundred people milling around the observatory wreckage, carrying away rocks. Those too young or old to lift debris ladled fresh water from buckets into cups and passed out fruit to those who’d been working since morning and refused to take a break. Nearly every face Sera had seen in the cave the night before was out here now, helping to dig the elders out from under the debris.

Soon the sun started to set, but that didn't slow the Mayas. So it didn't slow Sera either. She lifted as many smaller stones as she could manage, carrying them to one of several piles of rubble near the temple. Riq did the same, Kisa now working at his side. Sera occasionally scanned the crowd for Dak, hoping he'd woken up and demanded to join the rescue efforts. She knew that's exactly what he'd do.

But there was no sign of him.

"Cocom!" Itchik continued to roar. "Kan Boar! Pacal!"

"Who are these people anyway?" Sera asked Riq and Kisa as she tossed two grapefruit-size rocks onto the pile of rubble.

"Wise men, right?" Riq said, turning to Kisa.

Kisa wiped sweat from her brow and nodded. "They are the scribes of our village."

"Why were they in the observatory during the storm?" Sera asked as the three of them started back toward the wreckage site.

"Only Itchik knows for sure," Kisa said. "Though many believe they were working on a secret project to be studied by the men of Yuknoom the Great, king of Calakmul. His men will be visiting our village in a few days' time."

"I still can't believe Itchik is a king," Sera said, recalling what Riq had told her on the way down the hill. "He never even let on last night."

"He is our king," Kisa said, "but more important, according to Itchik himself, he is a father and husband and uncle."

Sera nodded, but she was having trouble wrapping her head around these Mayas compared to the Maya she'd read about. Itchik didn't set himself apart from everyone. She thought that's what all kings did. And it moved her to see everyone pitching in to help rescue the trapped elders.

When Kisa broke off to get a cup of water, Sera took Riq by the arm. "Did you ask her about the riddle?"

He nodded. "In a roundabout way. Apparently, when she was little she survived a bite from the deadliest snake in the lowlands. Her uncle said she needed to honor the snake for not taking her life. That's the reason she works snakes into her jewelry. Seems weird for it to just be a coincidence. I'll keep working on it."

Sera let out a defeated sigh. "What are we doing here, Riq? Dak's hurt, and the Ring is malfunctioning, and we aren't getting any closer to understanding the riddle. I'm so confused."

“I am, too, Sera. We just have to keep searching.”

Sera saw Kisa approaching with two cups of water. At least Riq had made a friend, she thought. Which made her think of poor Dak, laid up in a dingy cave, alone.

Kisa handed a cup to both Riq and Sera, and they thanked her.

As Sera finished her water, she heard a small commotion building on the other side of the rubble. She set down her cup next to Riq’s and Kisa’s, and the three of them hurried around the wreckage, toward a gathering crowd.

“What’s happening?” Kisa asked a stocky Mayan woman.

“They’ve spotted the scribes underneath the wreckage,” the woman said excitedly. “They’re alive!”

Sera pushed her way around several people to see for herself.

Itchik was right up front calling out, “Pacal, remain calm! We will get you out of there!” He turned to the group of men next to him and said, “It’s a miracle they’re not harmed. Now let’s hurry.”

It took another hour to clear a wide enough tunnel for the scribes to climb out of. Sera watched them emerge, one by one, dirty but otherwise unscathed. The last man who came out was carrying a large tablet of bark-colored paper, which was filled with strange-looking glyphs and paintings. He handed the tablet to Itchik, who looked it over, saying, “How did you survive, Pacal?”

Pacal pointed back at the tunnel. “We huddled next to the wall with the ceiba tree. It saved our lives.”

Itchik smiled and nodded, looking back and forth between the three filthy men and the tablet. “It is our good luck charm as always,” he said.

“While we were trapped, I decided I will paint the tree onto the first and last pages of the codex,” Pacal said. “I believe it will be a worthy addition.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

Sera couldn’t believe what she was seeing. An actual Mayan codex. She ducked down so she could peer into the narrow hole. It was dark inside, but once her eyes adjusted she was able to make out the large tree painted on the wall. She got goose bumps and quickly turned to Riq. “The riddle!”

“I was thinking the same thing,” he said.



It was late by the time Sera made it back to the cave and Dak's bedside. He was still unresponsive, though Jasaw seemed to think his condition had improved. Sera wasn't so sure. If anything, Dak's injuries looked worse. There was a lump the size of a softball on the back of his head. The backs of his arms and shoulders were entirely black and blue.

"He looks awful," Sera said.

"It is not important how he appears on the outside," Jasaw said, waving more incense over Dak's bare chest. "It is his insides that matter. And there is no longer a danger of his brain swelling."

Sera stared at Dak. She was beginning to trust Jasaw a little more, though she still wished he could back up his claims with an MRI.

Once Jasaw left, Sera pulled out the SQuare and powered it on. She and Riq had ducked behind a huge tree outside the village to study the riddle before trekking back to the cave. But even knowing that the symbol of the ceiba tree was part of this local codex, they were just as lost.

The riddle came up, and she read it aloud to Dak, over and over, hoping something would jump out at her:

*A snake charmer and a clown*

*A treasure that never was*

*A gift from the deity Itzamna: from 9.10.5.10.7 to 11.17.2.13.10*

*Trace the symbol of the ceiba tree toward the truth of the curse*

Sera read each phrase a dozen times, but they still didn't add up to anything. And Dak just lay there, unmoving.

Next, she booted up the Ring. She had been able to get the display working again, but something was still wrong. The Ring wouldn't accept any new data. Every time she input new coordinates, she got an error message. It was deeply troubling.

Eventually, she shut off both machines, curled up on the ground next to Dak's cot, and closed her eyes. She pushed Dak and the riddle out of her mind, and instead focused on her trip to the Cataclysm. She remembered the flooding streets. The bloodred sun. But as soon as she saw herself reaching for the doorknob of her house, things went blank.

Again.

What had she seen that was so awful her mind wouldn't let her remember?



## A New Purpose

RIQ STOPPED pacing and looked over Sera's shoulder as she continued tinkering with the Infinity Ring. He sensed her frustration, and he wished there was more he could do to help. But she was operating on a level of physics that was simply beyond him. They'd been huddled behind the cave like this for several hours already, and it didn't seem like they were any closer to a solution. She'd gotten the screen to come back on, but all it did was flash a series of error messages.

Riq resumed his nervous pacing. He needed to get down to the village and find Kisa. During another sleepless night he had decided to ask for her help with the riddle. It went against every Hystorian principle he'd ever been taught, but he was going to show it to her. Maybe she'd be able to decipher something that he and Sera weren't seeing.

Sera placed the Ring onto the thick grass and clenched her fists. "I've figured out what's wrong," she said. "But you're not going to like it."

"What is it?" Riq asked.

"Basically, the Ring rebooted when it hit the ground. Everything is still operational . . . except the Ring 'forgot' what the date is. It doesn't know when we are. And if it doesn't have that data, it can't warp us out of here. It doesn't know what our starting point is."

"That's not so bad," Riq said. "We just have to figure out the date?"

"Think about it," Sera said. "The Maya have a calendar system, sure. But it's different from ours. The Ring's programming is all based on a European calendar. And the Mayan people have had no contact with Europeans."

"We'll get it, Sera." Riq figured it was a good idea to put a positive spin on things. "Even if we have to cross the ocean to do it."



Sera shook her head, staring at the Ring.

After a long silence, she picked it back up and resumed her tinkering. Riq watched, knowing he couldn't tell her the other thing he'd been thinking about all night. How he wouldn't mind being stuck here for another day or two. There was something genuinely special about this place.

And while he knew their mission was crucial, Riq wasn't exactly in a hurry to return home.

He hadn't told the others yet. Maybe he never would. But their visit to 1850 had cost Riq a great deal. He had been forced to interfere with his own family tree, and that meant he was pretty sure he had no family left in the present day. It also meant he could cease to exist if he ever returned to the twenty-first century. He wasn't sure which possibility scared him more.

He was doing a good job of keeping his emotions in check, but all the uncertainty had hit him the previous afternoon, while he and Kisa were helping clear debris from the site of the observatory. Suddenly, these thoughts had hit Riq so hard he had lowered himself into the mud and covered his face with his hands.

Kisa had knelt beside him and patted him on the back and asked if he was okay. But that was it. She didn't press him for details. She understood that there were things about him she would never understand. And she accepted it. And wasn't that what true friendship was all about?

Riq realized two things in that moment:

One: Not counting his fellow time travelers, he'd never had a real friend before — other than his grandma.

And two: If Kisa was a real friend, then he should be able to trust her with the riddle.

Sera threw her hands in the air. "I have no idea what else to try, Riq. What if we're stuck here forever?"

Riq paused a few seconds, thinking about this. How would he feel if they were stuck here forever? The idea didn't bother him nearly as much as it should. "Look," he said, forcing himself to focus, "why don't we forget about the Ring for now and concentrate on the riddle? If we go down to the village, we can ask Itchik about the ceiba tree. And I have a few questions for Kisa, too."

The worried look on Sera's face made Riq feel guilty. He'd never seen her so distraught.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, slipping the Ring back into her satchel. “Let me check on Dak and then we can go.”



They stumbled into Itchik as soon as they’d made it into the village. He was standing at the foot of the fallen observatory, laughing.

“Itchik?” Riq said.

Itchik turned to look at Riq and Sera, his grin falling from his face. “How is your friend? His condition is improving, I hope.”

“Jasaw claims he’s getting better,” Sera answered. “But he’s still unresponsive.”

Itchik nodded. “My entire family owes him a debt of gratitude. That was my youngest daughter he pushed out of the way.”

“What are you doing out here?” Riq asked. It seemed more than a little odd that a king would be laughing at his own fallen observatory. “Everything okay?”

“Oh, yes.” Itchik turned back to the rubble and said, “I was just thinking about how long it took us to build. Many years. The entire village pitched in. We made many important discoveries about the world from inside these walls.”

“Why were you laughing, then?” Sera said.

“My scribes were not harmed,” Itchik said. “And I believe one’s greatest misfortune is also his greatest opportunity. We will build a new observatory now. One that is bigger and better. One that will not fall, no matter how hard the wind blows.”

Riq wished he could have this kind of attitude about life, too. But it was easier said than done. He looked all around the village, at the series of storm-damaged huts people were already attempting to rebuild, the towering temple, the muddied white road. There had to be a reason Riq, Dak, and Sera had come here. It couldn’t be a random mistake. What if they’d come here specifically for Riq? So he could meet these people and see how they live and hear what they believe?

Riq looked up when he heard voices. He spotted a group of children hurrying down the path toward them.

“King Itchik!” they called in unison. “King Itchik!”

Itchik and Sera looked up, too. Riq saw that there was a smaller group trailing behind the children. Older kids. Teens like him. One of them was Kisa.

“King Itchik!”

“Yes, children, what is it?” Itchik asked.

A boy at the head of the pack spoke. “The men have arrived from the jungle!” he said, out of breath as they reached the foot of the fallen observatory. “King Yuknoom’s men. From Calakmul!”

“They’ve come days earlier than expected,” Itchik said. “Where are they now, children?”

“The north ball court,” the biggest Mayan boy said.

Itchik turned to Riq and Sera. “I must go greet the great king’s men,” he said. “They have come to appraise our learning. You are welcome to meet them, too.” He started following the children back the other way.

Riq and Sera looked at each other. “I’m going with him,” Sera said. “Maybe I can find out more about the codex.”

“I’ll meet you there later,” Riq said.

Sera nodded and hurried to catch up with the group heading toward the ball court. Riq moved toward Kisa. Before he could even open his mouth to ask to speak with her, she took his arm and told him, “Come with me.”



Kisa pulled him into an empty hut that no longer had a roof. This hut was much smaller than the one Riq had visited during the great storm. “I don’t trust these men,” Kisa told him as soon as they were alone.

“The king’s people?” Riq asked. “Why not?”

“Itchik believes they want to study our codex so they can learn from it. But he’s too trusting. I believe they want to steal our work and claim it as their own. Everyone knows Pacal is the best scribe in any village.”

Riq looked out the open door. Several older Mayan women were in an organized line sweeping the road. Men were moving in and out of other huts with ancient-looking tools. “Shouldn’t we warn Itchik?” he said, turning back to Kisa.

“He won’t listen. All he cares about is proving our progress to others.” Kisa took Riq’s arm. “You need to be careful, too,” she said. “And the smaller boy who was hurt. They have been known to capture people who look different. I heard they take them back to Calakmul and shove them in cages. People pay to view them.”

“Trust me,” Riq said, remembering his experiences in 1850, “nobody’s putting me in a cage.”

Kisa nodded and picked up one of the ceiling boards lying by her feet. She stared at it for a few seconds and then turned to Riq with glassy

eyes. “I guess I’m just worried for the people I care about. This storm has ruined so many of our homes. And our observatory. Everyone is working hard to recover. And here come these men from the richest village in the lowlands, demanding to see the fruit of our learning. It doesn’t seem right.”

“I wish I could be more help,” Riq said.

Kisa shook her head. “You have your own worries.”

Riq focused on the ground, thinking. No matter what happened to him, he needed to make sure Dak and Sera were okay. He needed to make sure the Hystorians’ mission didn’t end here. He pulled the SQuare out of his satchel and looked up at Kisa.

He waited for her to ask what it was, but she just stared at it, watching him push the power button. “I was wondering if you’d look at something for me,” he said.

“Of course,” she told him. “But I’ve never seen anything like that. I may not be any help.”

He typed in the password and pulled up the riddle, then held the screen up for Kisa to see. When she gave him a blank look, he blushed. Of course she couldn’t read it. It was written in English. He translated for her verbally.

“This is why you asked about snakes in my jewelry,” Kisa said.

Riq nodded. “Do any of the lines make sense to you?”

“I don’t know what the clown could be. Or the treasure. But I know Itzamna, of course. He is the god who gave us our calendar. And the numbers you read, those are calendar dates. One of them is today. The other is far into the future. Knowing one, it is a simple matter to deduce the second.”

The hair stood up on Riq’s arms. “One of them is today?”

Kisa nodded.

Riq powered down the SQuare and stuck it back in his satchel, looking all around the battered hut, trying to think. He saw old cooking tools and fallen boards and cloth. He saw a half-covered piece of wood that had been carved into a snake head. Riq knew he needed to tell Sera about the significance of today as soon as he possibly could. The Hystorians really had led them here intentionally. It was now just a matter of figuring out why. Dozens of images flashed through his mind: Itchik leading them into his hut; the scribes coming up out of the rubble;

the storm as seen from the mouth of the cave; Jasaw burning incense over Dak's lifeless body.

"Is everything okay?" Kisa asked.

"I'm not sure," Riq said. "I just know I need to get to Sera. You've helped us tremendously, Kisa. And please —"

"Don't worry," Kisa said, cutting him off. "I will not mention the riddle to a soul."

Riq nodded. "Thank you."

"Be careful, Riq. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Riq squeezed her hand and turned to leave, but he only made it as far as the open door before spinning back around. "I need to tell you something, Kisa. Something I've been thinking about all day."

"What?"

"The three of us. Me, Dak, and Sera. We've been traveling from place to place, trying to make the world better. It's a quest I prepared for my whole life. But I've realized something since we arrived at your village."

Kisa held the ceiling board, waiting for Riq to finish.

"Maybe helping the entire world is less important than helping a specific community. Because with a community you can see faces. You can know them, and they can know you back." Riq returned to Kisa, took the board out of her hands, and studied it for a few seconds. "Who lived in this hut before the storm hit?" he asked.

Kisa lowered her eyes. "Me and my family."

Riq nodded. "You know, all my life I've cared more about a quest than I have about people. I believed having a friend would take my focus away from what was important. But I was wrong about that, Kisa. Having a friend is the most important thing in the world."

"It's the most important thing for you, too?" Kisa asked.

"From this day forward."

"And are we friends?"

Riq nodded. "I'd like to think we are. Even though we haven't known each other very long." He handed the board back to Kisa. "Do you think it'd be okay if I stayed here and helped your village rebuild? It would be a great honor if your people would allow me to help."

"We'd like that very much," Kisa said, dropping the board and taking his hands in hers. "I only wish I could do something for you in return. Something just as important."

“You already have,” Riq told her.

His heart was racing. But at least the matter was settled. He would stay here and help Kisa and her family. Dak and Sera would be fine without him. They were the important time travelers. And when their mission was successful, Riq’s life back home wouldn’t be the same. If he even *had* a life there. Here, at least, he would serve a purpose. He would help rebuild a village. And he would be Kisa’s friend. And maybe he could even assist the scribes when they started their next project.

“I have to go,” Riq said. “Sera needs to know what you’ve told me.”

“And I have to help Mother with the children,” Kisa said.

Riq let go of Kisa’s hands and started through the door when Kisa called out, “And, Riq.”

He turned around.

“Please be careful of those men. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Nothing can happen to me now, Kisa.” Riq left the hut and started running through the village, toward the ball courts. His legs and chest felt incredibly strong, like he could run forever. Like nothing in the world could slow him down.



## The Significance of Today

SERA SAT in awe as Pacal opened the codex like an accordion and pointed to the top right section. “Here we show the path of Venus,” he said. “We tracked its movement in the sky for many years.”

Sera looked at the foreign glyphs. Her translation device did little to help her with archaic written text. But it was an amazing thing to see in person. This was the first written language on the entire continent. And it had an almost otherworldly beauty to it. Each glyph was a miniature work of art.

After Sera had followed Itchik and the children to the ball courts, she had met the four visitors from Calakmul. They were squatty, powerful-looking men with dark brown eyes and bushy brown hair. She also met the three scribes, Cocom, Kan Boar, and Pacal. Itchik invited all the men to a special meal inside the temple, prepared by the best cooks in the village. Sera was all set to head back to the cave and check on Dak when Pacal announced that he would skip dinner and do a little more work. Sera was shocked when he then turned and asked if she wanted to accompany him.

She jumped on the offer, thinking she might get a chance to see the codex up close.

“Past generations have followed the movements of the sun and moon and stars.” Pacal went on, “And in our first very amateur codex, we did the same thing. But in this much wiser version I believe we are the first to have charted the course of Venus.”

“Wait,” Sera said, “there’s another codex?”

“A very poor one. A learning experience, you might say — though that alone took us years. We call it our trial codex. I wanted it destroyed,

but King Itchik insisted he keep it for reasons of nostalgia.”

She looked at Pacal, a short old man with bad teeth. There was something very familiar about him. Every time their eyes met she had a strange déjà vu feeling, not a Remnant exactly, but close.

“How’d you see Venus without a telescope?” Sera said.

“Telescope?” Pacal asked. “What is that?”

“Uh, never mind.” Sera chided herself in her head. Of course he wouldn’t know what a telescope was. “Don’t mind me. I tend to make up words when I’m tired.”

Pacal stared deep into her eyes, and Sera felt herself tumbling toward that déjà vu feeling again. Only this time she saw the face of a man from her past. A man she hadn’t thought about in years. She had been three years old, playing in the yard at her uncle’s place, when a large van pulled up. Several men got out, and the leader walked onto the property and talked to Sera’s uncle. They had a long, spirited conversation and then the man walked over to Sera; he’d smiled big and knelt down so he could stare deep into her eyes. He was an older man with long gray hair tied back into a braid and a dark leathery face — the kind you might see at the top of a totem pole.

He’d rubbed his chin, still smiling, and said, “You’re going to be special, Sera. I can see it in your eyes. But you must understand, there is always a price to pay for being special. You must have strong shoulders. Do you have strong shoulders, Sera?”

She’d nodded but didn’t say a word.

He’d stood up and said, “Good.” Then he left in the van with the other men.

When Sera’s uncle came over to her, he’d said, “You see how rude he is? He didn’t even introduce himself.”

“Who was he?” Sera had asked, looking up at her uncle.

“Your grandfather,” he’d told her.

That was exactly who Pacal reminded her of. The man who said she would be special. Her grandfather.

Sera pulled herself out of her memory and asked Pacal, “So, why is Venus such a big deal anyway?”

Pacal picked up his fine-tipped brush and began painting a ceiba tree on the last panel. “We have learned much from Venus,” he said. “This planet tells us when it’s best to plant each crop and when we need to prepare for battle.”



Sera tried to decide what she thought of basing real-life decisions on the path of a planet. It reminded her of kids at school who always wanted to know what sign of the horoscope everyone was. Sera had never understood that superstitious approach to life. She'd always been about hard science. But Pacal still seemed smart.

“And this section here describes the work we’ve done with the calendar,” Pacal said, pointing to the fifth panel. “Using the Long Count system, we’ve calculated the dates far into the future.”

Sera wished she could explain all the amazing things that happened from Pacal’s time up to the modern day. He seemed like the kind of person who would want to hear about everything. But she couldn’t go down that road. She had to keep the conversation on the calendar. “So, at any point does your codex mention a curse?”

“A curse?”

“Yeah,” Sera said. “A curse that says we’re headed toward a Cataclysm and the only people who can save us are the SQ?”

“There is no curse in our codex,” Pacal said.

Sera tried another approach. “So, what happens when you get to the last date of your calendar? Will the world come to an end?”

“Oh, no,” Pacal said, laughing now. “That will only mark the end of a cycle. A new cycle will begin immediately after. We hope it is a time of even greater learning.”

They talked about other knowledge the scribes had shared in the codex, and something slowly happened in Sera’s brain. She stopped listening quite as intently and started thinking about the error messages on the Infinity Ring again. She still had no idea what the date was. But the Maya kept track of time by another system. And it was an extremely detailed system based on decades of scientific observation and record keeping. That meant raw data, which she could cross-reference with the data stored in the Ring.

Sera slipped the Ring out of her satchel and stared at it. Pacal continued to paint the ceiba tree. At one point he looked up at the Ring and furrowed his brow, but instead of asking any questions he went back to his codex.

After a few minutes, he cleared his throat and said, “Can I offer a word of advice, Sera?”

“I’m all ears,” she answered.

“I’ve come to believe that everything is of this earth. Including you and me. The most complex human invention already existed in the soil. We do not make up new things out of thin air; we simply find already existing elements, born of this earth, and place them in new combinations. Progress is merely organization and creativity.”

Sera nodded, trying to process what she’d just heard.

Pacal put down his paintbrush and reached into his bag. He turned his back on her. “And one other thing,” he said. “Never forget the importance of laughter.” He turned back around wearing a wooden clown mask, stuck his thumbs in his ears, and wiggled his fingers. “I usually only pull this out when I want to entertain small children.”

Sera definitely wasn’t expecting this. “So, wait . . . I’m like a small child to you?”

“The best part of all of us is a child,” he said.

Sera cracked up a little. It was funny to see the village wise man goofing around with a silly mask.

A few seconds later an alarm went off in her head.

The clown reference in the riddle. Maybe they’d already found the snake charmer *and* the clown. Before Sera could fire off all her questions for Pacal, though, Itchik pushed open the temple doors and led the four visitors from Calakmul into the room, saying, “And here, my friends, is the surprise I told you about.” He pointed at the codex. “Our greatest achievement of learning.”

The four men stood there nodding and staring at the codex as Pacal pulled off his clown mask and shoved it back in his bag.

Itchik guided the visitors deeper into the temple, saying, “Pacal will describe for you all that our codex explains.”

Sera saw that one of the men was looking at the Ring in front of her. She couldn’t worry about that now, though. She was too busy reviewing all their previous coordinates. There was astronomical data there, which she cross-referenced with the codex’s detailed information on Venus and the moon. She was able to deduce a likely date: July 25, 638. Her hypothesis was confirmed when she reprogrammed the Ring settings and the error messages disappeared.

She pumped her fist and shoved the Ring back into her satchel and stood up.

Pacal was now leading the four visitors through each panel. A second group of people shuffled into the temple as Pacal explained the calendar.

A few locals. The other two scribes. “Sera,” someone said. She saw Riq step into view and wave her over to him.

As Pacal continued, Sera slipped around the visitors to get to Riq. “I’m so happy you showed up,” she said. “I have major news.”

“Me, too,” he said. “I just spoke to Kisa. She helped me understand the numerical part of the riddle. Apparently, there are two dates listed.”

“And?”

Riq seemed more excited than she’d ever seen him. “Sera, one of those dates is today.”

“Today?” Sera repeated.

“See? We were supposed to come here all along. Just like I thought. All we have to do now is figure out what’s significant about today.”

Pacal was now speaking about the path of Venus.

“That’s huge,” Sera said. “Speaking of the riddle, you’ll never guess what that Pacal guy just pulled onto his face a few minutes before you got here.”

“What?”

“A clown mask,” Sera said. “He has to be the clown from the riddle.”

Riq’s eyes grew big. “We’re finally figuring this thing out,” he said.

Sera nodded and said, “Which makes me think Kisa really is the snake charmer. We just need to figure out what that means, exactly. But here’s the best news of all.” She patted the satchel holding the Infinity Ring and said, “You’re looking at the girl who just figured out how to eliminate all those error messages.”

“Are you serious?”

Sera explained how Pacal’s description of the Mayan calendar helped her figure it out. “The point is,” she said, shoving Riq in the shoulder, “we can now leave whenever we want.”

“That’s . . .” Riq suddenly looked concerned. “I mean, great work, Sera.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“What? Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

Riq nodded. “Of course I’m sure. But we should probably concentrate on the significance of today’s date for now, right?”

“Definitely,” Sera said. She turned when she noticed two of the visitors heading for the door. One of them glanced at her before stepping outside the temple.

Sera held a finger up to Riq and moved toward the group of Mayas listening to Pacal. “Where did they go?” she asked Cocom.

“To meet up with the rest of their men,” he answered. “They said the storm set them back and they need to make it to the next village by morning.”

“They’re not even staying the night?” Sera mumbled to herself as she moved back toward Riq. “That seems sort of weird.”



It was twenty more minutes before Pacal finished explaining the final panel of the codex. The two remaining visitors were beyond impressed. They raved to Itchik, who had a big smile on his face, and they patted Pacal on the shoulder and then the smaller of them began folding up the codex, saying, “Yuknoom the Great will be honored to display this in the very center of our empire.”

Itchik’s smile quickly faded. “We can’t let the codex leave Izamal, of course. But King Yuknoom is welcome to send his own scribes here to make a reproduction.”

“Oh, no,” one of the visitors said, “the king was very specific about this. We are to bring back all of the great achievements we encounter on our journey.”

Itchik glanced at his own men behind him. “I’m sorry, friends,” he said, moving forward. “I cannot allow —”

“Stay where you are,” the larger of the two visitors said, pulling a large obsidian blade from a pouch on his belt and holding it out toward Itchik. “I will make this simple. We are taking the codex back to Calakmul with or without your consent.”

Sera and Riq looked at each other, wide-eyed.

The man pulled Pacal toward him and put the knife to his neck. “You don’t want us to harm the wise old man, do you? Understand, I have over two dozen men out there waiting for us. If anyone follows us there will be terrible consequences, including the loss of one of your own.”

All the local men, including Itchik, stepped back as the two visitors exited the temple, shoving Pacal to the floor. As soon as they were gone, everyone spoke at once, and Sera couldn’t understand a thing. She went over and helped Pacal to his feet.

“Silence!” Itchik shouted.

The room went quiet.

“We are not going to let anyone take our codex,” Itchik began. “And more important, nobody touches our precious Pacal. Now we need to organize a large group to go after these men. Cocom, go alert the warriors and have the cooks prepare several days’ worth of rations. Kan Boar, I need you to prepare a map with all the possible routes to Calakmul. A few of us will follow them now — because I’m not so sure about the extra men they claim to have — and others will cut them off from the front. Men, we will not return without our codex.”

Riq turned to Sera and said, “I’m going with them.”

“It’s not a good idea,” Sera said. “You said yourself, we need to stick together.”

“I know, Sera. But I have to help them right now. This may be the very reason we’re here.”

She nodded. “I’ll go check on Dak. I want us to be prepared to leave immediately.”

Sera watched Riq join the small group of Mayan men who were about to go after the visitors who had taken the codex. One of the men handed Riq a crude version of a sword. Riq turned and met eyes with Sera, and then turned back to the man giving instructions. Sera could tell something had changed in Riq. She just didn’t know what it was.

She slipped out the door and started toward the cave.

It was still light out but the sun was low on the horizon. She moved out of the village and began climbing the path up to the cave when a man suddenly stepped out in front of her. It was one of the visitors who had left the temple early, the one who had stared at the Infinity Ring.

Sera instinctively turned to run the other way, but she ran right into the arms of the other visitor who had left early. He spun her around to face the first man, who said, “We came here because we heard rumors about the wisdom of the local codex. But we will leave with more than that.” He pointed at Sera’s satchel and said, “Remove the device from the bag.”

“What device?” Sera said, trying to wiggle her way out of the other man’s grasp.

“You know the one I’m speaking of,” he said, moving toward her. “Remove the device, and show me what it does.”



## The Comeback Kid

DAK HAD been dreaming for what seemed like days, and it was all one continuous dream. He had fallen into the deep well by his parents' house, and now he was slowly trying to climb out. But he could only climb a step at a time, because he had to dig out each new handhold into the soft rock with a set of keys. He'd dig for hours and hours with the sharpest key, one of the keys that opened his parents' secret lab, and then he'd test the carved-out gap with his fingers. If it were deep enough to get a good grip, he would pull himself up, shoving his foot into one of the holes he'd previously dug.

Every once in a while there would be a voice above him. He couldn't see because the sky was pitch black, but he didn't need to see to know whose voice it was. He'd been listening to Sera blabber all his life. She spoke to him about their mission and her worries, but she also read him the Mayan riddle, over and over, to the point that he now had it memorized.

But something was changing about his dream now. He was no longer digging handholds with the lab keys; he was using the key his parents had given him when he'd seen them in 911 France. And the hole above him was growing lighter, like morning was taking over the sky above the well. And the voice calling to him was no longer Sera but someone else. A different girl. And soon Dak found himself right up near the top of the well, and this new-girl-who-wasn't-Sera reached for his hand and lifted him up into the light until he fell over the lip of the well and opened his eyes, shouting, "I've got it! I've figured out the riddle!"

"What?" the girl said.

He was startled to find himself not on the ground beside a well but in a dingy cave with the faces of two strangers hovering above him. One of the faces, the female one, belonged to a girl he remembered from the Mayan hut that crumbled in the storm — he winced as the memory of the falling wall flashed through his head. The other face belonged to an old wrinkly dude who had a bunch of feathers sticking up around his dome.

“Dak?” the girl said. “Can you hear me?”

Dak sprang up to a sitting position and looked around. He was behind a hanging blanket surrounded by dozens of flower bouquets and plates of food. “Where am I?” he demanded.

“You’re awake,” the girl said. Then she turned to the feather dude and shouted, “He’s awake!”

“You should remain lying down,” the man told Dak.

But Dak wasn’t in a lying-down kind of mood. “Where’s Sera?” he demanded. “And Riq? What’d you do with my friends?”

“They’re both down in the village,” the girl said. “You were knocked unconscious in my uncle’s hut. People carried you here so you could rest and our healer could take care of you.” She pointed at the man next to her. “This is Jasaw. And I’m Kisa.”

Dak rubbed his eyes and looked all around, the back of his head throbbing.

“And do you see all these gifts around you?” the girl asked him.

“Tough to miss,” Dak said, stretching out his stiff neck.

“They’re from the people of my village. If it weren’t for you, I don’t know what would have happened to my cousin.”

“No need to toss roses,” Dak told her, his thoughts finally clearing. “That’s just sort of what I do, Kisa.”

“What do you mean?”

“I save lives.”

The girl didn’t even crack a smile. “Well, we are all very much in your debt.”

Dak shrugged and reached down for what looked like a hunk of good ol’ American cheese, but as soon as he took a bite he realized it was squash and spit it back onto the plate, cursing himself because America hadn’t even been founded yet, so how could there be American cheese? He wiped his mouth on his bare arm and motioned toward the healer. “This dude doesn’t have a whole lot to say.” The man was putting herbs into little wooden boxes.

“He’s been busy because of the storm. Several people were injured.” Kisa moved closer and looked right into Dak’s eyes. She turned to the healer and said, “Do you think he’s okay to walk down to the village?”

“Not a good idea, but the boy is free to do what he thinks he can.”

Kisa turned back to Dak and said, “I’m sorry to weigh you down with troubles when you’re just now feeling better —”

“But . . . ?”

“But I kind of need your help. I’m worried about your friends, actually.”

Dak felt a surge of energy and stood up. “Something happened to Sera?”

“Well, I’m not sure yet,” Kisa said. “I’m just worried because —”

“Let’s stop wasting time,” he interrupted. “We need to go find her. Now!”

“Are you sure you’re well enough to walk?” she said.

“Of course I’m sure,” he told her. “I could run a marathon if I needed to. Or lift a car. Or jump over a malaria-infested stream.” He jumped up and down a few times to prove himself. “See?”

Dak promptly fainted into Kisa’s arms.



As they left the cave, Dak’s arm wrapped around Kisa’s shoulder for support, Kisa said, “When you woke up you said something about solving a riddle. What did you mean by that?”

“Have you ever heard of the Hystorians?” Dak asked.

“Only from you and Riq.”

“Have you ever heard of a Time Warden?”

Kisa shook her head.

“That’s because they don’t exist here yet. Neither group has infiltrated the Americas in this era. That’s my theory, at least.”

“What are the Americas?” Kisa asked.

Dak took his arm from around Kisa’s shoulder. “I’m feeling better,” he said. “I think I can make it on my own.” He stretched his neck again and reached back to feel the lump on the back of his head. “Anyway, the specifics are not important. The main thing is the question of why we’ve been sent here. That’s what I’ve figured out.”

“And?”

“We’re here to protect your codex. To ensure that it is not destroyed by the Spanish conquistadores who are eventually going to invade your



land and try to convert you to their own ideologies. It's Censorship 101, Kisa. Control the masses by controlling the acquisition of information. Your codex is the 'treasure that never was.' "

"I'm not understanding many of the things you're saying."

"It's not important, my fair lady. The point is, there are no Hystorians in Mayan territory, therefore there's no one here to properly secure the codex — which I believe is a very important document. Enter myself, Sera, and Riq."

"There needs to be Hystorians here, then," Kisa said.

"Preaching to the choir, my friend. Preaching to the choir."

"But this is exactly why I came for you, Dak. Some men showed up in the village today, and Itchik —"

"My man, Itchy," Dak interrupted. "How is that guy? He never calls. He never writes."

"He's well," Kisa said, flustered. "Itchik believes they only want to study the codex, but I'm afraid they have come here to take it for their own. The people from Calakmul believe they have a right to anything they want."

Dak stopped and turned to Kisa. "Trust me, we're not gonna let that happen."

"Good," she said.

They walked halfway down the lush, tropical path before Dak heard voices. He stopped again and held Kisa back by the arm. He put a finger to his lips as a sign for her to keep quiet, and then he crept up the path a few more paces until he had an obscured view of a short squatty man who kept peeking back over his shoulder, like he was acting as a lookout man. Dak crept up a little closer, and he saw the heads of two others in the bushes. A man and a girl with brown hair . . .

Dak's heart climbed up into his throat.

The man was holding a knife to the girl's throat, and the girl was Sera.

And the lookout man was holding the Infinity Ring. It was like a great big déjà vu moment. Last time he had sprinted at the pack and tackled the man holding the Ring. And it had been a mistake. But as Dak sat there, studying the scene, he realized something: He would always race to help Sera when she appeared to be in danger. He didn't care how many times it was a mistake. There was no way he would ever be able to

just sit back and let something possibly happen to her. No way. Not on his watch.

He stood up, still a bit wobbly on his feet, and then he sprinted at the man holding the Infinity Ring, just like he had a few days earlier, yelling, “Nobody messes with my friends!” Only this time he sidestepped that man at the last second and plowed into the man holding a knife to Sera’s throat. The knife went flying, and so did Dak and the man.

“Dak!” Sera shouted.

“Dak!” Kisa shouted.

Dak and the man both tumbled into the jungle brush, and the back of Dak’s already wounded head smacked into a tree.

He was dazed.

The whole jungle swirled around him.

He could hear details of sound he’d never heard before: the whining of mosquitoes and the hot wind rustling the leaves of every tree in the jungle and the songs of faraway birds and the cracking of twigs as he scrambled back to his feet without even telling himself to scramble back to his feet. He found himself face-to-face with the man he’d just knocked over.

The man was grinning. “Glad you could join us,” he said.

Over the man’s shoulders Dak saw Sera and Kisa trying to wrestle the other guy to the ground. The Infinity Ring lay in the grass near their feet.

He lunged for the man again, but the Maya stepped to the side and threw Dak to the ground. He looked up at the man, who was still grinning, knowing Dak was no match, especially in his current physical condition. And Dak saw that the other dude now had Sera and Kisa pinned to the ground, a firm grip on each of their necks.

It was over.

The man in front of Dak stepped on Dak’s back and told his friend, “Release the younger girl,” he said.

The man did, and Sera stood up, looking very hesitant. “Dak,” she said. “You’re okay.”

“Well, technically not at the moment,” he said, pointing up at the man standing on him. “But, yeah, I’m no longer bedridden. What’s going on here?”

“I’ll tell you what’s going on,” the man above him said. “We came here to retrieve a local codex, but we’ve stumbled into something

potentially even greater. This metal thing your friend has.”

“Our king, Yuknoom the Great, will be very happy,” the other man said.

“He’ll be even more satisfied when we understand how to use it.” The man standing on Dak reached down for his obsidian knife. He dug a knee into Dak’s back and held the knife to his neck. “So we’re clear about things,” he said to Sera, “you’re going to explain how the item works, or I’m going to slice your little friend into several pieces.”

“Easy with all that ‘little’ talk,” Dak said. “Besides, the item in question no longer even works. Tell him how I broke it, Sera.”

Sera shot him an uneasy look.

“Wait, you fixed it?” Dak said.

“Sort of.”

“How could you?!”

“Quiet!” the man kneeling on Dak said. “If you continue talking, I’ll slice you up just to get some peace and quiet. Now, go on.” He motioned for Sera to pick up the Ring.

Sera slowly reached down, pulled the Ring off the grass.

“First of all,” the man continued, “what is it?”

*Lie to him, Dak thought. Make something up. Tell him it’s a can opener.*

“It’s a time-traveling device,” Sera said.

Dak let his face fall into the grass.

“It allows you to warp to whatever era you program into it,” Sera went on. “We are from the future.”

The man holding down Dak looked at his friend and said, “Are you hearing this? We will be legends in Calakmul!”

“Yuknoom will build temples in our honor,” the man replied.

Dak lifted his head. Sera was holding the Ring out for the men to see. Kisa was squeezing her eyes shut, like she was injured.

“How do you go to another time?” the man above Dak asked.

“It’s simple,” Sera said. “You just program in —”

“Uh, Sera?” Dak interrupted. “Maybe a little less detail here?”

“As I was saying,” Sera said, keeping her eyes on the man, “you just program in your desired year and geographic location, and the machine will take you there. But there’s a catch.”

“And what is that?”

“The machine will not work unless the three of us” — she gestured to herself, Dak, and Kisa — “are in physical contact with it. It is programmed to respond only to our DNA.”

The squat man looked at his friend. “What is DNA?”

Kisa began humming in a strange way, like it was helping her manage the pain. And her eyes were still squeezed shut.

The other guy shrugged. “Who cares? Let’s just take the machine and let the king worry about it from there.”

“DNA,” Sera said, “is a nucleic acid that contains the specific genetic code of each unique organism. In other words, it’s a way to decipher that you are you and I am me. No two people have the same DNA. And the machine, as I’ve already explained, will only work if it is in direct contact with the DNA of all three of us.”

“The girl is deranged,” the squat man said.

“Oh, I disagree,” the man above Dak said. “In fact, she’s given me an idea. If this thing needs something from each of them in order to work, then we simply cut off a hand from all three of them. We will bring back to Calakmul the codex, this machine, and three hands.”

“It’s genius,” the other man said.

Dak’s captor brought his obsidian knife down to Dak’s wrist. He began a sawing motion. Dak screamed.

“Dak!” Sera shouted.

But the man kept sawing, and Dak was pinned in such an awkward position he couldn’t even move.

And then suddenly the man began shouting, “No! Please!” And he let go of Dak and hopped off him. The other man was shouting, too.

Dak twisted around to see what was going on. He spotted a few large snakes slithering out of the dense jungle foliage. Their tongues whipped around outside of their mouths and then sucked back in.

Dak and Sera both started screaming, too.

Kisa just lay there, cringing in pain.

But an odd thing happened. The snakes slithered right over Kisa. They appeared to be converging on the two Mayan men, ignoring the kids entirely.

“It’s witchcraft!” cried the man with the knife.

“Run!” yelled the other.

As soon as the men had disappeared into the trees, the snakes dispersed. It was hard to tell whether they were in pursuit or simply

passing through.

Dak staggered to his feet, holding his wrist. “What just happened?”

Sera pointed to Kisa, who was now sitting up. “Did she just save our lives?”

Dak looked at Kisa, who was fingering the locket around her neck. “Sometimes I come out here when I’m bored, and I hum to them. But nothing like this ever happened.”

Dak turned to Sera. “Dude, she’s like one of those guys who plays the flute or whatever and gets a snake to dance around.”

“Maybe,” said Sera. “Maybe they were just . . . migrating. Do snakes migrate?”

“You have to go find Riq now,” Kisa said.

“What about you?” Dak said.

“I need to be alone for a few minutes. I will be right behind you.”

Dak turned to Sera and shrugged.

“Come on,” said Sera. “I think I know which way Riq was headed.”



## Hand Over That Thief

“QUIET, MEN,” Itchik said, his chest heaving in and out. “It won’t be long now.”

But Riq noted that the king of Izamal was breathing just as loudly as the rest of them. They’d run several miles through the hot and humid jungle — taking the “long road” out of town, as Itchik called it. Sweat streamed down Riq’s face, stinging his eyes, salting his lips. But he tried to follow orders and breathe more quietly.

The plan was to take a different route than the men from Calakmul, circling around to cut them off from the front. Once they saw the men emerge on the path, Riq would spring into action. His particular role in Itchik’s plan was by far the most dangerous, but he wasn’t complaining. This was his purpose now. To help the people of Kisa’s village. And if helping them meant putting his life at risk, that’s exactly what he’d do.

“Easy, men,” Itchik said, regaining his breath.

As they waited, Riq thought about how different his new life would be. A few days ago he was a thousand percent committed to the Hystorian mission. It was the very blood that pumped through his veins . . . and always would. But today he was going to step away from the front lines of the Hystorians’ struggle. His loyalty now belonged to the people of Izamal. And Kisa. His heart hammered inside his chest as he imagined waking up in this jungle village for the rest of his days.

Itchik turned to Riq, said, “You ready, son?”

“I’m ready, sir,” Riq said.

“Remember, just toss the codex over your shoulder when you get it. Huracan will be there to pick it up.”

“Yes, sir.” Riq glanced back at Huracan. The man nodded to him. Then Riq glanced at the man who had possession of the trial codex. It was inside a leather bag slung across his shoulder.

Riq whipped his head back around when he heard hushed voices coming from the path. Men from Calakmul were approaching. He raised up into a squat, readying himself to scamper through the dense foliage and onto the footpath, but Itchik held Riq by the elbow and shook his head. “Not yet,” he mouthed, pointing toward the path.

Riq saw that there were six men walking in a tight formation. But none of them had been in the temple with Pacal. And there was no sign of the codex.

“They were telling the truth,” Itchik whispered back to his men. “They have reinforcements.”

After the men had passed, Itchik continued, “I’ve seen this tactic before. They have a group of men lead the way, scouting the path. Then we will see a middle group, which will likely include the men who took the codex. And finally, there will be a scout group bringing up the rear. We will have to act quickly, men. Our plan will have to be fully executed before the final group is upon us.”

Riq expected to see the second group right away, but there was more waiting. And the longer he waited, the more questions came into his head. What if he couldn’t wrestle the codex away from whomever was carrying it? What if he failed in his very first role as a member of Kisa’s community? Or what if the men who’d stolen the codex went a completely different way? He wiped sweat from his forehead and swallowed. If there really was going to be a second group, what was taking them so long?

Seconds later, he heard the cracking of branches in the jungle behind him and spun around. The rest of the men turned around, too, some brandishing their knives. To Riq’s complete surprise, it was Sera who emerged . . . with Dak! One of the warriors put a finger to his lips, urging them to keep quiet.

But Dak snuck over to Riq anyway and knelt beside him. “You have to come with us,” he whispered.

“You’re walking around again?” Riq said.

“I’m more than just walking around.” Dak stood up and did a stupid five-second dance, then knelt back down. “Seriously, though, you need to come with us.”

“Can’t do it,” Riq said.

Sera leaned over their shoulders, whispering in Spanish so that their translators would have to recalibrate, allowing them a moment of privacy within the crowd. “We’ve figured out the riddle, Riq. We’re supposed to take the codex with us. And I was able to work out the second date from the riddle. It’s in 1562! That must be our next stop.”

Riq balked. “Why would you take the codex with you?”

Itchik shot them both a look. Riq knew he couldn’t understand what they were saying, but he wanted them to be silent.

“Uh, to protect it?” Dak whispered. “Sera told me some guys already tried to steal it. We both believe this is the Break we’re supposed to fix before we move on. And we seriously need to move on.”

Riq looked over his shoulder at Sera, who was nodding. He turned back to Dak, who whispered, “Come on, dude, be a team player.”

“If you don’t quit bothering me,” Riq whispered back, “we’ll never get the codex back. We’re waiting for the people who have it to pass. Now go on. Shoo.”

“I see,” Dak said, rubbing his hands together. “Finally, a bit of that Mayan warmongering I’ve been hoping for.”

Riq shook his head. The kid was much easier to get along with when he was unconscious.

“Look,” Dak whispered, “one of us has to grab it so we can warp the heck out of this place. Sera has the Ring all programmed and ready to go. Here’s an idea: Let’s live to fix another Break. This place has been hard on my system.”

Riq stared at Dak, trying to decide the best way to break the news that he wasn’t going anywhere. Because it was definitely best to get that part out of the way. “I wanted to talk to you about that, Dak,” he began. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking over the last couple days —”

“Well, there’s a step in the right direction,” Dak said.

“Ha-ha. Anyway I’m just going to come out and say it. I’m not going to continue on from —” Riq wasn’t able to finish his sentence because right then Itchik grabbed his elbow again and pointed down at the path.

Riq turned and saw five men walking up the hill — including the two he’d seen in the temple earlier. One of them had the folded-up codex tucked under his left arm.

Riq furiously waved Dak away.

This was his moment.



Itchik held on to Riq's elbow until the last possible second, then he pushed Riq out from behind the trees. Riq's adrenaline kicked in as he scampered down the densely packed hill, shouting at the Calakmul men, "Take me with you! Please! They'll kill me!"

The men stopped, clearly caught off guard.

The front three pulled their knives.

Itchik and a few of his warriors followed Riq down the hill, commanding, "Stop that boy! He is to be punished for his crimes!"

Riq pushed past the first row of Calakmul men and jumped onto the man holding the codex. "Please!" he continued shouting. "They'll kill me!"

"Get off him!" the men with knives shouted. One slashed Riq's cheek, blood instantly trickling down his face and neck. But Riq kept his wits about him. He had to execute the plan. He yanked the codex out of the man's hands, still pleading for help, and tossed it over his shoulder.

Riq glanced back in time to see Huracan pick it up and pretend to hand it to Itchik, who already had the trial codex in his possession. Itchik then thrust the trial codex up over his head and shouted, "Men, this belongs to you! Take back your codex and display it in the greatest empire in all the land! All I ask in return is that you hand over that thief!"

The Calakmul men were busy kicking at Riq and slugging him in the back and head. Riq covered himself and closed his eyes, and he could now hear Dak and Sera screaming for the men to stop, but the beating didn't stop until Itchik stepped over Riq and waved everyone away. He handed over the trial codex, and pulled Riq to his feet . . . only to slug him square in the jaw.

Riq was facedown on the path again with no memory of falling.

"Take him!" Itchik shouted back at his warriors.

Several of Itchik's men picked Riq up and held his arms behind his back as Itchik announced, "This boy was caught looting huts in the wake of the great storm! He will be punished in the square!"

Riq was slightly dazed from all the abuse he'd taken, but he was still clearheaded enough to smile on the inside. The plan was working perfectly. The Calakmul men had backed off. Huracan had already left for the village to hide the real codex. The man holding the fake looked through a few pages of glyphs, but didn't seem to have any clue that there was a difference.

Itchik commanded to his men, "Lead him back! Now!"

But before they could take Riq anywhere, one of the Calakmul men said, "Why not sacrifice him right here in the jungle? Isn't that what a thief deserves?"

"Yeah, do him in now!" another shouted. "So we can watch!"

"No!" a voice from the crowd yelled.

Riq looked up to see Kisa hurrying through the foliage and onto the path.

"He didn't steal anything!" she shouted, shoving one of the men who held Riq. The man laughed, managing to keep ahold of Riq.

"It's okay," Riq said to Kisa under his breath.

Kisa ignored Riq and shouted at Itchik. "He didn't steal anything! It's all a bunch of lies!"

Many of the Calakmul men were laughing now. Which meant, Riq realized, they were no longer calling for his head. Itchik played along with Kisa's assertion by commanding, "We will attend to this matter back in the village. A verdict on the thief will be made by this evening so the gods can bear witness." Then he turned to the visitors from Calakmul and said, "Men, I thank you for capturing the prisoner. Please give my regards to Yuknoom the Great."

They all nodded. One said, "A couple of our men are missing. If you come across those misfits —"

"You can try them before the gods, too," another man interjected.

All the Calakmul men laughed.

The first man continued, "Tell them we're already on our way to the next village."

"Of course," Itchik said.

Riq couldn't believe his eyes; the men from Calakmul were all turning and continuing down the jungle path, away from Izamal. The plan had worked. Itchik's men were all quietly congratulating one another as Riq reached up to touch his bloody cheek.

"Kisa," Itchik said, grinning from ear to ear. "How you always innately sense what's happening, I'll never understand."

"You knew it was all part of the plan?" Riq asked.

Kisa nodded. "I knew Itchik would never strike an unarmed person. It had to be an act." Riq saw that she was holding a metal locket with a chain.

“Yes, I’m very sorry about the punch,” Itchik said. “You’ve sacrificed so much for us, son.”

Riq felt a rush of pride as he watched Itchik join his men, but there was a worried look on Kisa’s face. “What’s wrong?” he asked her.

“You will not stay here,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Riq said. “I thought it was all settled.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I want you to go.”

Riq’s whole body felt suddenly paralyzed. “I don’t understand,” he said. “Earlier you said —”

“It only matters what I’m saying now,” she said with a stern look on her face. “Please go, Riq.”

Dak and Sera pushed through the men to get to him. “Wow,” Dak said. “You took some serious abuse.”

“Are you okay?” Sera asked. “We tried to rush down here to help, but the men hiding in the bushes stopped us and told us all about the plan. You agreed to this?”

Riq nodded, but he could hardly follow Sera’s words. He was too numb from what Kisa had just said to him. He watched her back away, wondering what had changed. Why was she so against him staying now?

“We’re leaving right this second,” Dak said. “We heard there might be another group coming through here, and I don’t want to take any chances.”

Sera was already kneeling down onto the path and reaching into her satchel for the Ring. She pulled it out and powered it on.

Riq looked at Kisa. He decided he had to stay anyway. She would come around in time. “Dak, Sera,” he began, “this is very hard for me to say, but —”

“Do you all have everything you need?” Kisa interrupted, pushing herself forward again.

“I think we do,” Dak said. He turned to Riq. “Sera and I now believe the codex is supposed to remain here in the village under Kisa and Pacal’s protection. Right, Sera? You think our mission was just to get it back from those men?”

“I’m positive,” Sera answered, looking up. “Which we’ve done thanks to you, Riq.”

“Honestly,” Dak said. “Great work, dude.”

Riq was going to try one more time to explain he intended to stay, but then he saw the callous look on Kisa’s face. Like he suddenly

disgusted her. And then one of Itchik's men said, "Look!" His finger was pointing down the path to where a third group of Calakmul men was fast approaching. There were at least fifteen men marching in formation, less than fifty yards away.

"Come on!" Dak shouted at Sera. "We need to do this now!"

"I'm trying!" Sera shouted back.

Itchik and his men were already retreating up into the jungle. Riq grabbed Kisa's arm before she could go and said, "You really want me to leave?"

She stared back at him, completely straight-faced, and said simply, "Yes." Then she handed Riq the locket. Riq looked at the snake carved into the front of it. Then he looked up at Kisa, his heart breaking. "But I thought —"

"You thought wrong," she said, cutting him off.

He let her go — the only thing he could do — and watched her disappear into the bushes.

"Stay where you are!" one of the Calakmul men shouted at Riq, Dak, and Sera.

Riq turned and saw the men hurrying toward them.

"Now, Sera!" Dak shouted.

"Got it!" she shouted back. "Grab on!"

Riq reluctantly reached for a part of the Ring, staring up at the tree Kisa had just ducked behind. His face stung. And his back and ribs and head were pulsing with pain. But that was nothing compared to the pain he felt inside. Something had changed for Kisa. She no longer wanted him around.

The men were less than ten yards away when Sera shouted, "Here we go!"

The Ring brightened, and Riq was so jarred by the abrupt feeling of its power that he accidentally dropped the locket onto the ground. "Wait!" he shouted, reaching down for it, but just before he could wrap his fingers around the snake's metal tail he was whisked away into blackness and it was lost.



## What Sera Saw

SERA IS sucked right back into her memory of the Cataclysm.

She sees herself in the small motorized emergency raft again, speeding through intersection after intersection. And she's screaming, begging for all of it to stop. The fires. The flooding. The acid rain pouring down from above. The earth's violent shaking.

Sera zips past several miles of absolute destruction until she's out of the city and turns onto her childhood street. She lets off the gas as she nears her house, then dives overboard and swim-walks her way up the flooded driveway. When she reaches a trembling hand out for the doorknob, she half expects to black out or be whisked away — like every other time she's tried to access her memory of the Cataclysm.

But this time she remains present.

She watches herself slowly turn the knob, push open the door, creep inside the only home she's ever known. "Uncle Diego!" she calls out.

No answer.

Sera moves through the living room, leaving the front door wide open behind her. The wood floors are covered in two feet of grayish water. Many of her uncle's possessions are submerged or floating randomly: books, documents, framed photos, candles, old newspapers and magazines, vases. Most of the furniture is overturned. A leg is missing from the dining room table. The TV is knocked over and punctured. The mirror below the clock is shattered and hanging askew. It looks like someone has ransacked the place, looking for something, but what?

The kitchen is even worse. The fridge is wide open and mostly cleaned out, its door ripped from the hinges. The cupboards are full of

broken plates and glasses. Sera stops cold when she sees the empty wooden knife block. The utensil drawer is still full of forks and spoons. But the knives are gone. Where are the knives?

“Uncle Diego!” she calls out again.

Nothing.

Sera sloshes out of the kitchen, but when she rounds the corner she lets out a short scream. There, frozen on the stairs, is a rail-thin man wearing her uncle’s raincoat. Long, unkempt hair and shaggy beard. Bugged eyes. The man looks half-dead already.

Sera’s heart is beating inside her throat as she says, “Who are you?”

Instead of answering, the man leaps down the rest of the stairs and splashes his way across the living room.

“Stop!” Sera shouts, but he’s already out the door.

She bounds up the waterlogged stairs, her whole body now wired with fear. What if something happened to her uncle? She pushes open her own bedroom door first. A few items are scattered around the floor. But otherwise it’s the way she left it. She continues to her uncle’s bedroom door and reaches for the doorknob, preparing herself for what she might find.

She slowly pushes open the door and looks around.

There’s an unfamiliar sleeping bag in the middle of the room. Trash piled in the far corner. But nothing else out of the ordinary. The man she’d just seen had most likely been living there. But for how long? And where was her uncle?

That’s when it hits Sera.

She has to go and see about the barn.



The rushing water is up to Sera’s waist as she steps up to the front door of the barn. She has to keep a wide stance and lean against the current to keep from getting swept away. Before she pulls open the heavy door she flashes back to all the Remnants she’s had over the years, many of which have involved this very barn. She’s always known it’s important. But she’s afraid to find out why.

Sera forces herself to pull open the door, and as soon as it’s halfway open she peeks her head inside and sees a body floating faceup in the water.

She immediately falls to her knees, sobbing.

Her uncle Diego.

The only family she's ever known.

His face strangely contorted, eyes wide open.

She covers her own face, and then slaps down at the water and stands back up. Behind her uncle she spots four more bodies. All floating facedown.

She moves toward them, hiccupping and gasping for breath, tears streaming down her face. Her right hand shakes as she reaches out for the dead man's cold arm, turns over his body. It's a face she's never seen before. But at the same time, it's oddly familiar. She turns over a dead woman next to him, which evokes the same strange feeling. She can't pinpoint the familiarity. But it's incredibly powerful.

The third and fourth bodies make her fall to her knees again, slapping at the water and shouting, "No! Please!"

Dak's parents.

She buries her face in her hands and cries so hard that strange animal sounds are escaping from her throat and she can hardly breathe.

And then a horrific thought occurs to her and she looks up at the first two bodies again. She stares at their faces. Then she looks at Dak's parents again and back at her uncle. The two unknown faces are oddly familiar. Oddly like her own face.

"No," she whispers, moving back toward the first man again, studying his eyes and mouth. "No."

She reaches into his back pocket for his wallet, then pulls out his ID and reads the name:

*Daniel Froste.*

Her father.

She stares down at the man without crying or breathing, and then she looks at the woman. Her mother. Then she angles her own face up at the ceiling and screams so piercingly loud her ears continue ringing long after she closes her mouth.

The parents she's never known have come back for her.

And now they're dead.

Sera rips at her own hair and forces her head underwater, right cheek pressed up against the muddy ground. She stays like this until her lungs burn and her thoughts grow thin and disappear, and she can no longer stand the pain in her chest.

Still she refuses to let herself up, and then the memory slips away and she is lost.



## One Thousand Years Later

SERA OPENED her eyes, shaking uncontrollably.

Her body no longer felt real now that she'd broken through her repressed memory of the Cataclysm. She felt fake. Made up. Though she was clearly sitting on the clay dirt, behind a massive building, it felt like she was floating floating floating. Up into the sky. Into nothingness.

Everyone was going to die.

Including the parents she'd always dreamed about. They would die trying to fight their way back to her. She'd find them in her uncle's barn.

Her Remnants would forever take on an entirely different meaning.

Sera turned and saw Dak and Riq looking around, taking in their new environment — which wasn't new so much as updated. They'd landed in the exact same place they'd landed the last time they warped. Mayan country. Izamal. In a large patch of tall, thick grass. Except where the fallen observatory rubble once lay, a beautiful new observatory, twice the size of its predecessor, now stood. Itchik had done exactly what he had promised. And the temple, where Sera had just watched Pacal paint a ceiba tree into the codex, had been transformed into a massive church.

Judging by the sun, it was late afternoon. The people walking the raised white road in the distance were a combination of traditional Mayas and white men dressed in pious robes. Sera knew right away they were the Franciscan monks she'd read about, the ones who settled in Mayan villages and tried to convert the indigenous people to their own religious beliefs.

"I'm not saying anything this time," Dak suddenly announced.

Sera found Dak staring at her. Poor Dak. Her best friend had no idea what she'd found in her uncle Diego's barn.



“Nope,” Dak said, shaking his head. “I refuse to even bring up the fact that tears are literally streaming down your face. Uh-uh. My lips are sealed.”

Sera couldn't bring herself to tell him about his parents. It was too awful. And it was way off in the future. At the same time, Dak was so worried about his parents being lost in time. Wouldn't he want to know that they'd made their way back?

Sera stared at Dak, trying to decide if it was better to know the unbearable truth or live as long as possible in happy ignorance.

“Know why I'm keeping quiet?” Dak said. “Because it's none of my business. Who am I to point out that you're shaking like a hairless dog in the snow?”

“It's just the warp again,” Sera managed to say.

Dak held up his hands, saying, “Eh, eh, eh. No need to even discuss it, Sera. I'm steering clear of your hysterics from now on.” He turned to Riq, said, “I see Lover Boy over here has the same strategy.”

Riq didn't even look up.

“Wow,” Dak said, turning back to Sera. “What's wrong with you people? Last time I checked, I was the one who nearly got decapitated by a falling wall.”

Sera tried to think up something lighthearted to say back, to at least pretend things were normal, but her mind drew a blank. Every time she looked at Dak she remembered turning over the bodies of his dead parents. And that made her remember the faces of her own dead parents, too. And her uncle Diego.

Dak pulled the SQuare out of Riq's satchel, shaking his head. He turned on the power. “Nobody has a sense of humor anymore,” he said, typing something on the keyboard. “What we're doing isn't easy. I understand that. But we have to keep our composure, right? I mean, we have a fairly important job to do.” He looked up at Sera. “We have to save the world.”

Sera wiped her tearstained face on the arm of her *huipil* and said, “I'm pretty sure we're all aware of that, Dak. Just cut us some slack.”

Dak motioned toward Riq with his thumb and said, “I saw what happened to the Riq-ster over here. His girlfriend or whatever tried to give him a parting gift — a locket or something — but he dropped it. Isn't that right, Riq?”

Sera watched Riq turn to Dak, scowling.

Dak was oblivious, of course. “See, that’s why I tell all my bros back home to steer clear of the lovey-dovey stuff. It’s asking for trouble, dude. You want my advice? If you absolutely *have* to interact with the opposite sex, make sure it’s with a girl you can treat like one of the guys. Like Sera.” He kicked at her with one of his feet.

“Wow,” Sera said. “That’s so . . . sweet of you.” Sera might’ve slugged Dak in the ribs if she hadn’t just remembered finding his dead and bloated parents during the Cataclysm.

Riq stood up suddenly. Without saying a word he walked away.

“Hey!” Dak called after him. “You can’t leave! It’s going to be dark soon! And we’re supposed to stick together!”

Riq didn’t even turn around.

“Riq!” Sera shouted, but he’d already rounded the corner of the new observatory, out of sight. She turned to Dak. “You happy now?”

“Was it something I said?”

Sera rolled her eyes. “When is it *not* something you said?”

“I was just offering the guy a little romantic guidance.” Dak shook his head. “Some people are too sensitive.”

“We should go after him,” Sera said. She stood up and looked around to try to get her bearings. It was odd seeing all the things that had changed. The updated huts and new trees and paved streets. But at the same time, everything felt so familiar.

“Fine,” Dak said. “But first let’s look at the latest riddle I just pulled up.” Dak turned the Square around so Sera could read the screen:

*To save the reproduction of the treasure’s truth, do the following:  
Seek the help of those who follow “the most important thing in the  
world”*

*Then dig deep, deeper, deepest, unlocking a long-locked door  
It will take a polyglot to understand the wisdom of the glyphs  
and the forgery of the curse*

Sera read it twice and then she stood back up, shaking her head. “I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I.”

She wasn’t surprised the difficulty of the riddles was increasing. She knew that the Hystorians hadn’t had time to completely program the

Square. Things were more vague now. The further they got into the Breaks, the less information they would have.

“What the heck is ‘the most important thing in the world?’” Dak said.

Sera shook her head. “No idea.”

“It seems like an extension of the first riddle, though,” Dak said. “Both talk about truth and the treasure and the curse.”

“The ‘treasure’ is the codex,” Sera said. “We know that much.”

“And the curse is about the Cataclysm described in the Great Mayan Codex.”

Sera just looked at Dak for a few long seconds. “According to Pacal, there was never any mention of a Cataclysm in his codex.”

“None?”

Sera shook her head, trying not to think about what *she* knew about the Cataclysm.

“And what does the riddle mean by a ‘reproduction?’” Dak asked. “I still wonder if we should’ve just taken Pacal’s codex with us.”

Sera was having trouble concentrating now. She’d stare at the words “unlocking a long-locked door” and all of a sudden she’d find herself remembering the Cataclysm again. Her flooded barn. The bodies she had to turn over.

“A *polyglot* has something to do with language, right?” Dak said.

“I’m not sure,” Sera said. “But I know someone who would. We really need to go find Riq. We should all be doing this together. And that means you might have to go easy on him for a little while.”

“I guess you’re right,” Dak said, standing up. He looked at Sera. “You know, I really did see him drop a piece of jewelry that Snake Girl had just given him.”

Sera had seen the way Riq looked at Kisa. It couldn’t have been easy for him to say good-bye. “You missed a few things while you were recovering in the cave,” she said.

“I figured as much.”

They started walking around the corner of the observatory, in the direction they’d seen Riq go. As soon as they rounded the corner, Sera nearly ran right into a teenage boy. It wasn’t Riq, though. It was a Mayan boy who had a large bag slung over his left shoulder. He wore an outfit similar to Dak’s.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay,” she said, her translator device kicking in to match his dialect.

He straightened his bag and said, “Well, have a nice evening.” He started to leave, but then turned around and looked over Sera and Dak for a few seconds, noting their attire, before saying, “A bunch of us are meeting in the cave in a little while. If you’re interested in practicing the old ways.”

“Maybe we’ll join you,” Dak said.

Sera and Dak watched the boy hurry along the path that Sera remembered led out of the village and up toward the cave. Dak poked her on the shoulder and said, “A bunch of Mayas racing off to the cave. Isn’t this exactly how things started off last time?”

“It is,” Sera said, but she had a sneaking suspicion that the cave served a much different function in 1562.



## This Is Who We Are

THE WARPING that seemed so hard on everyone else was practically therapeutic for Dak. He couldn't believe how much better he felt as he and Sera continued to wander the village in search of Riq. Only a few days ago — well, a few days ago plus a millennium — a wall had fallen on his head. How many people had had an actual stone wall fall on their head? The number had to be fairly low. And Dak was just walking around like it was nothing. He had to admit, it was a little superheroesque.

"I'm back, baby," he muttered under his breath.

And being back meant fixing the Breaks, saving the world — all of it hopefully leading to a heartfelt reunion with his parents that would be shown live on some kind of morning news show. And, no, he wouldn't be rocking the breechcloth on national TV.

"I don't see Riq anywhere," Sera said as they moved down a less crowded village path, about a hundred yards from the observatory.

Dak stopped walking and surveyed the scene. The huts were more modern now and slightly larger. And they were packed in more tightly. He turned to Sera. "Dude, we have to start thinking like the guy. Where would you go if you were in love with a charming snake charmer who's been deceased for approximately a millennium?"

Sera shot him a disapproving look.

"What?" Dak said. "I'm trying to put myself in the mind of the missing."

"Not funny." Sera started walking again.

"You have to admit," Dak said, following her. "It was pretty wild what she did with all those snakes."

Sera picked up a rock, tossed it down the path in front of them. “All I know is we were lucky to get out of there alive.”

“I’ll give you that.” Dak watched another small group of Mayas hurry past with bags slung over their shoulders — all of them glancing back down the road behind them, like they were doing something they weren’t supposed to. It suddenly occurred to Dak how much these people’s lives must have changed since the arrival of the Spanish. One thing was for sure, Dak no longer viewed the Maya as untrustworthy. History hadn’t given them nearly enough credit — which made him wonder what else history had gotten wrong.

“What do you think that sculpture symbolizes?” Sera asked, motioning toward the one in front of a stone wall that surrounded a small cluster of huts. It looked like a face partially covered by a net or scales. “I’ve seen it in a few different places now.”

“I’ve seen it, too,” Dak said. “My guess is it reads *In Honor of Dak Smyth, Our Eternal Hero.*”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Sera scoffed.

“Because of, you know, how I saved that little girl or whatever. You saw all the flowers and food they left me, right?”

Sera rolled her eyes.

Another group of Mayas passed by, slightly larger than the one before. “Excuse me,” Sera said to the last young woman. She pointed at the sculpture. “Do you know what that means?”

“Of course,” the woman said, backpedaling as she spoke to Sera. “It’s the secret symbol of friendship.”

“Secret symbol of friendship?” Dak said. “That’s weird. If it’s so secret, why’s it in so many different places?”

The woman looked Dak up and down. It was clear she hadn’t noticed him when she’d spoken to Sera. “I’m sorry, but we’re actually in a hurry,” the woman said. She turned back around and jogged a few steps to catch up with her friends.

Dak looked at Sera. “Clearly, she was intimidated by my imposing physique.”

“That’s probably what it was,” Sera said. “Why don’t you let me do the talking from now on?”

Dak shrugged. He had to admit that Sera did a better job of blending in here. “Suit yourself. Anyway, it sure seems like a lot of people are heading up to the cave. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“What?”

“That we should follow them, check out what’s going on?”

Sera put her hands on her hips and looked away from Dak for a few seconds. He followed her eyes down the alley where two Franciscan monks were walking side by side in stuffy-looking robes. “We can’t just leave Riq,” Sera said.

“We’re not leaving him,” Dak told her. “We’re just momentarily suspending our search. Besides, isn’t this mission bigger than any one person? That’s what Riq always says. Just because he’s off somewhere pining over Medusa doesn’t mean the rest of us are supposed to stop working.”

Sera was staring at Dak with a sad expression on her face. Like she felt sorry for him. He’d caught her staring at him this way a number of times since they landed here. He didn’t understand. Why would anyone feel sorry for him? Was it because of his parents? Sure, it was rotten luck they’d been lost in the river of time, but they’d be reunited. And in the meantime he was busy living history, fixing it where it needed to be fixed. “Look,” Dak said, breaking eye contact, “I promise we’ll come right back down. Unless you wanna stick around for a conversation with *those* guys.” He motioned toward the monks.

“Fine,” Sera said. “We’ll go check it out, then we’re coming right back down here and finding Riq.”

Dak pumped his fist a few times, then waved for Sera to follow him. He didn’t know what to expect from a secret Mayan meeting, but it was bound to be worth seeing.



Dak and Sera climbed the boulders in front of the cave and took a few steps inside. The musty smell brought back a slew of memories for Dak. He remembered waking up on the makeshift cot with a man wearing feathers, burning herbs over his chest. He remembered watching Sera’s lips move as she spoke to him in words he couldn’t quite hear. But mostly he remembered the strange visions he’d had throughout his recovery. There was the one where he was trapped inside a well. Or the one where he was climbing through a cramped tunnel that never seemed to end. But the strangest vision of all was the one where Sera had come to him and revealed that Itchik was her father.

Dak peeked at Sera now as she studied the several dozen Mayas gathered inside the cave. If Sera traced her family tree back far enough,

he wondered if it would lead her all the way back to this very village.

“All right, my good people,” a young Mayan man suddenly announced. “Bring it in a little tighter, please.” They moved deeper inside the cave, some of them holding candles or masks or food offerings.

Sera led Dak behind a large limestone sculpture, where they were hidden. “We can listen for a few minutes,” she whispered, “but then we’re going back to find Riq.”

“Fine,” Dak whispered back.

“As you all know,” the man continued, “there are rumors that Diego de Landa will physically punish anyone caught paying respect to our spiritual ancestors. We have begun to meet in these caves because the monks believe they are haunted. That provides us some measure of safety. Any newcomers, tonight you will join us in honoring Ah Mun, Chan K’uh, Chaac, K’inich Ajaw, and many others. In our traditional ways. Because this is who we are, yes?”

Dak watched everyone nod and echo, “This is who we are.” He’d never seen anything like it.

“Good,” the man said. “Now pull out whatever you have brought, and let us begin.”

Anyone who had a bag reached into it now and pulled out some type of artifact. Dak saw them produce codices, masks, figurines, elaborate costumes and headdresses, incense sticks, detailed tapestries.

“They might be able to change the way we believe out there,” the man said, pointing outside the cave, “but they can never change the way we believe in here.” He tapped his thumb against his chest several times and repeated, “Never in here.”

Without any further direction, the Mayas all began chanting together and dancing. A few held masks up to their faces and bowed to the people around them.

Dak turned to Sera and whispered, “You heard what he said is going on, right? Diego de Landa is a Franciscan monk known for traveling to the most remote Mayan villages to try to convert all the indigenous people to Christianity. According to most historical accounts, he was the single most influential figure in the suppression of Mayan —”

“Be quiet, Dak,” Sera interrupted. “Just watch and listen. Maybe you’ll learn something.”



Dak grinned. “Look who’s starting to admire the Maya,” he whispered.

They both spun around quickly when they heard voices coming from the opening of the cave. Dak saw five large men, dressed much differently than the Mayas, peering in at the processions. They didn’t seem to notice Dak and Sera hiding behind the sculpture. One of the men pointed at the Mayas and nodded, and they all moved into the cave together.

Dak pushed down Sera’s head and ducked himself so the men wouldn’t see them as they passed by.

One of the Spaniards shouted at the Mayas, “Every one of you must come with us. There’s no use trying to get away.” Each of the five men produced either crossbows or muskets.

The chanting and dancing immediately stopped.

Many of the Mayas held up their hands and surrendered peacefully, but others sprinted toward the cave exit, pushing past the Spaniards on their way by, knocking two of the men over. The three men who remained standing opened fire on the fleeing Mayas. One young Mayan man fell onto his stomach when an arrow pierced his back. He hopped back up and staggered a few more steps, and then collapsed back onto the ground.

The surrendered Mayas all gasped as the injured man went still.

Sera made a move for the dying man, but Dak grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “They can’t know we’re here,” he whisper-shouted.

Sera turned her glassy eyes toward Dak but said nothing.

“Let’s make this easy, folks,” one of the Spaniards announced. “We don’t want any more casualties.”

The Mayas were all led out of the cave in connected shackles, heads bowed. The injustice of it all bubbled inside Dak’s chest. All they had been doing was celebrating their history. Dak could relate; history was everything to him, too. What if someone shot at him for studying the second Roman Empire?

He watched one of the Spaniards shove the last Mayas toward the exit of the cave and then they were gone. They had just left the dead Mayan man to rot.

“They killed him!” Sera cried, stepping out from behind the limestone sculpture. “And we did nothing!”

“What could we have done?” Dak said.

Sera knelt down beside the fallen man and closed his eyelids. “And for what?” she said, choking up as she spoke. “What did he die for?”

Dak knelt beside her. “It isn’t fair,” he said. “Maybe this is why we’re here, Sera. To make sure the Maya are no longer treated this way. Or maybe we’re here to change the way they’re perceived by future generations.”

Sera didn’t say anything. She just kept staring down at the man, shaking her head.

Dak moved deeper into the cave. He picked up one of the colorful masks and studied the details. Then he knelt down and flipped through several codices lying in the clay dirt. None of them had a painting of a ceiba tree. He moved over to a large wooden box filled with smaller masks and figurines and traditional-looking jewelry. He picked up a paintbrush, then a colorfully painted ceramic, an old locket similar to the one Kisa had tried to give Riq. Then he found several small ceramic instruments that resembled modern drums and flutes.

“Leave me alone!” Sera suddenly shouted.

Dak spun around to find a large Spanish man restraining Sera’s hands behind her back. The man looked up at Dak and said, “Let’s go, boy. Don’t make it any harder than it has to be.”

Sera tried to wrestle away from the man, but he whacked her in the back of the head with an elbow and tightened her restraints.

“Don’t touch her!” Dak shouted.

“Then get over here!” the man shouted back.

Dak reached back into the box and dug around for the locket. He pulled it out and hid it in his breechcloth as he stood up.

The Spaniard was already shoving Sera toward Dak and readying a second restraint.



## Wisdom in a Prison Cell

“IN YOU go!” a Spanish guard shouted, shoving Sera and Dak into a large cell that already held dozens of Mayas — many of whom Sera had just seen inside the cave.

“You killed my brother!” a Mayan girl shrieked, running toward the open door.

“Not me personally,” the man said, grinning. “But maybe one of my colleagues.”

Another guard held the girl back with a long club. “Brother de Landa warned you about practicing your witchcraft. But do any of you listen? No.” He slammed closed the door and locked it, shouting through the sliding peephole, “There’s a price to pay for choosing the devil’s path!”

The guards left, and the young Mayan leader from the cave helped the sobbing girl up and led her to the one bench in the room. He cleared away the people sitting there and had the girl lie down. Then he knelt and took her hands into his and spoke to her in a hushed tone Sera couldn’t quite make out.

Sera took in her surroundings. The cell was half underground. There were barred windows on three of the walls, a little above eye level, and through them Sera could only see a small portion of the sky, which was turning dark.

An older Mayan man approached Dak and Sera, and stood there with his arms crossed. “What is the most important thing in the world?” he asked.

“What?” Dak said. He turned to Sera and mouthed, “The riddle!”

“I know,” Sera mouthed back.

“Just as I suspected,” the Mayan man said. “You don’t have an answer.”

“No, we do!” Dak shouted. “The most important thing in the world is . . . corn?”

The man scoffed and moved away from Dak and Sera.

“Asymmetrical tortillas?” Dak called out after him.

The man didn’t even turn around.

Sera led Dak to an empty corner of the cell.

“That question was right out of the riddle,” Dak said. “We just have to figure out the answer and we’ll be a step closer to solving it.”

Sera leaned her back against the dirty prison wall and let herself slide down to a sitting position, her face falling into her hands. She’d never felt so defeated in her life. Or depressed. She was only eleven years old. Wasn’t eleven too young to process the things she’d experienced over the past twenty-four hours? The realization that she’d found her parents facedown in her flooded barn. Watching a man get taken down by an arrow when he didn’t even do anything. Being thrown into a prison. She couldn’t stand the way the Mayas were treated by the monks. How could a foreign people come waltzing into someone else’s village and start telling them what to believe? To make things worse, the Mayas didn’t trust her and Dak just because they didn’t know some secret code word.

Dak sat down next to her. “We’ll be okay, Sera.”

She looked up at him. “Will we, Dak? Because I’m not so sure anymore.”

He pointed at her satchel holding the Infinity Ring. “You still have the Ring, and I have the Square. We can use this time to regroup and figure out the riddle.”

Sera shook her head. “What’s the point, Dak? Are we really making a difference?”

“Of course we are,” Dak said. “What’s going on? You usually have such a good attitude.”

Sera paused, fighting the lump in her throat. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, Dak. We’re not actually *fixing* history at all. We’re not making anything better for anyone.” She motioned toward the Mayas. “They just want to live their lives and learn about the world and follow their traditions. And they can’t even sneak off to a cave to honor what they believe in? One of them has to pay with his life?”

“We already talked about this,” Dak said. He looked away from Sera for a few seconds, like he was thinking. Sera saw over his shoulder that the Mayan leader was now pacing the cell. “The point of fixing the Breaks,” Dak said, “isn’t to make history more morally correct.”

“Why not?” Sera said. “Why aren’t we trying to make the world a better place?”

Dak shrugged. “I don’t know, Sera. Sometimes we are, I think. But we’re just two kids. Two and a half, if you count Lover Boy. The point is, we’re sent to each place to fix a Break, not humanity.”

“So you don’t ever question it?”

“No, I do,” Dak said. “But at the end of the day I trust the Hystorians. They’ve been working to avert the Cataclysm and defeat the SQ longer than we’ve been alive.”

Sera stared at Dak. She wanted to come right out and tell him — how she’d been given a glimpse of the unspeakable Cataclysm. But she couldn’t. She had to keep this cancerous knowledge to herself.

Sera grabbed at her own hair and pulled, saying, “I don’t know if I can go on, Dak. I really don’t.”

“But you have to,” the Mayan leader said. “And you will.”

Sera looked up, saw the young man now hovering over her and Dak, his fists clenched. “There will always be injustice,” he continued. “In all things. And many times we will not be able to alter these things. But what we can *always* do is lift our heads and continue on. That part is in our control.”

Sera felt embarrassed that the man had overheard her whining. She must’ve sounded like a spoiled brat.

“They can lock us behind these walls,” the man said, shaking the bars in the window to the left of Sera and Dak. “All of us. The entire village. But in our minds we will always remain free. Remember that.” He reached a hand out and helped Sera to her feet, saying, “I am Bacab.”

“Sera,” she answered, trying to seem as respectful as possible. Because she already admired the man. She’d seen how all the people in the cave, many of them much older, were hanging on his every word.

Dak elbowed Sera in the arm and cleared his throat.

“Oh,” she said, “and this is my friend Dak.”

“Hi,” Dak said.

“A pleasure to meet you both,” Bacab said. “You’re not from around here, obviously. But where you come from does not concern me. It is

where you are now that matters. And that is with us.”

Sera glanced over at the rest of the Mayas. A few of them didn't seem as eager to accept her and Dak — probably because they didn't know the answer to the question from the riddle.

“So, how do we get out of here?” Dak asked.

“We have our ways,” Bacab said. “This is my fourth time inside this very cell. What they fail to understand is that I have a key in my room. Late this evening, my younger brother will realize I'm not home. The first place he will check is the prison cell. And he knows to bring the key.”

“Wait . . . you have a key?” Dak said.

Bacab grinned. “When I'm not organizing our gatherings, I work as a locksmith.”

Seeing the young man's grin made Sera feel better. She, too, wanted to be the kind of person who could grin in the face of adversity.

“We can't remain here long,” a second Mayan man said. “If the great storm comes as predicted, it will flood the cell. They will leave us to drown.”

“No one here is going to drown,” Bacab said. He turned back to Dak and Sera, and said, “This is my younger cousin, K'inich. He is an excellent locksmith's assistant, and he has traveled extensively, but he worries too much.”

“Wait, there's supposed to be another great storm?” Dak said. He banged on the stone wall with the heel of his hand. “Sure hope these bad boys are built stronger than they used to be.”

Bacab lifted Sera's chin so that their eyes met. “Young sister,” he said, “you have questions swimming in your eyes.”

“I don't know,” she said, embarrassed that she looked so uncertain. “Why are they even doing this? You weren't hurting anyone tonight.”

“The monks are frustrated. Their plan is to take over every village, from sea to sea, but in order to do this peacefully and efficiently, they must first convert my people to their religion. Then we will believe the land is theirs by divine right, you see?”

“So that's why you gathered in the cave,” Sera said.

“That and the acoustics make my voice sound nice,” Bacab said with another grin.

“They've been threatening us,” K'inich said. “Diego de Landa, one of the leaders of the Franciscan monks, says if we don't obey he will get

rid of everything we hold sacred.”

“Oh, wow,” Dak said. “I’ve totally read about this. That de Landa dude gets so mad he orders an *auto-da-fe*, where he —”

Sera stepped on Dak’s foot to cut him off.

“Ow!” Dak shrieked.

“You’re speculating, of course,” Sera said, shooting Dak a dirty look.

“Oh. Right.” Dak turned to Bacab. “What I meant to say is, aren’t you guys afraid something bad might happen to your codices and stuff?”

Sera noticed that K’inich was staring at Dak. “How could you know something that has yet to happen?” he asked.

“No, I don’t,” Dak said. “I was just . . . sometimes I get my verb tenses confused.”

“My hope is that a highly spiritual man like de Landa,” Bacab said, “would never stoop so low as confiscating our history.”

“Well, I wouldn’t hope too hard,” Dak said quietly, so only Sera could hear.

K’inich was whispering something into Bacab’s ear now. Sera pulled Dak aside and said, “Maybe this is the Break we’re supposed to fix.” After talking with Bacab she felt suddenly reenergized, like she was ready to fight again. Maybe this was the mark of a great leader.

“That’s it,” Dak nearly shouted. “We have to stop de Landa’s *auto-da-fe*.”

Sera put a finger to her lips for Dak to lower his voice. “So, at some point are you planning to explain what the heck an *auto-da-fe* is?” she said. “Or do you just enjoy hearing yourself say it?”

“*Auto-da-fe. Auto-da-fe. Auto-da-fe.*” Dak smiled. “Just kidding, dude. An *auto-da-fe* is —”

Before Dak could finish, a few of the Mayas got up suddenly and started converging around the far window. Bacab and K’inich hurried over to join them.

Sera and Dak stood on their tiptoes near the back of the crowd to try to see what was going on. All Sera could see was the bottom portion of a monk’s robe on the other side of the window. Someone was there. And that someone was now kneeling down to look inside the cell.

Sera’s eyes widened.

It was Riq.

Dressed like a Franciscan monk.

“What do you want?” one of the Mayas barked at him.

“To speak with Dak and Sera,” Riq said. “I’m not an actual monk, I promise.”

“Riq!” Sera shouted over the crowd.

“Why should we believe you?” another Mayan man said.

Sera started pushing through the pack. If she could just get to him, she could explain. Dak suddenly weaseled right past her, though, and lunged for the window, holding out a piece of jewelry. Riq reached his hand through the narrow bars and took it.

“It looks like the one you lost!” Dak shouted. “I thought maybe you’d want it!”

“Thanks,” Riq said, slipping it into the bag hanging off of the rope belt of his robe.

“Why are you here?” a woman shouted at Riq. “Haven’t you people done enough for one night?”

Several other Mayas began peppering Riq with questions, too, until Bacab shouted, “Silence!”

The entire cell went quiet.

“Thank you,” Bacab said. “Let me ask the boy our question before we proceed any further.” The Mayas nodded and made a path for Bacab to get to the window. As he wrapped his hands around the bars, he looked up at Riq and said, “What is the most important thing in the world, young man?”

Sera watched Riq look to the ground, confused. She was about to move toward the window so she could explain that they weren’t from around here, when Riq suddenly raised his eyes to Bacab and said, “Friendship.”

All at once the Mayas looked at one another, nodding, and began reaching their arms through the bars to shake hands with Riq.

Sera turned to Dak, who was already staring at her with a puzzled look on his face. He motioned toward Riq and said, “What the . . . ?”

Sera shrugged and told him, “You took the words right out of my mouth.”





## A Necessary Detour

AS RIQ hurried away from the subterranean prison cell, he kept repeating in his head the name of the boy he'd just been asked to locate, the boy that Bacab claimed would have a key to the cell: *Okib. Okib. Okib.*

He couldn't allow himself to forget.

But at the same time he was also thinking about the ancient locket Dak had handed him through the prison bars. It was the only reason he'd been able to answer Bacab's strange question. In a conversation with Kisa, he remembered telling her that the most important thing in the world was having friends. So he threw it out there to Bacab. But he was completely shocked that he'd gotten it right.

Riq pulled the locket out now as he moved through the village looking for the boy. It was rusted shut, the metal on both sides dull and badly dented. There was no way it was the locket Kisa had tried to give him before he warped away with Dak and Sera. Even if it was, would he actually want it? The girl had done nothing but confuse him. One minute she seemed so excited for him to stay. The next minute she was ordering him out of her village.

Riq was tempted to boot the locket right into the bushes.

He didn't, though.

He slipped it back into his belt's bag and continued repeating the boy's name in his head: *Okib. Oki. Okib.*



Riq had been walking around for a half hour before he spotted a small group of Mayan boys playing on a ball court. He called down to them, "By any chance, is one of you guys named Okib?"

The boys all looked at one another, shaking their heads.

“You sure?” Riq said. “I’m not a real monk, I promise. And I have an important message from Bacab.” He wished he could ditch the Franciscan robe he was wearing. It was making the kids nervous.

“He might be getting stuff out of the cave,” one of the boys offered.

“Did something bad happen?” another boy asked.

“I don’t think so,” Riq said, not wanting to alarm them. “Bacab just asked that I find Okib.”

“You should try the cave,” the first boy said.

Riq thanked them and started in the direction of the path that would lead him to the cave. He looked down at his robe, feeling entirely out of place. When he left Dak and Sera earlier, he had ducked into the church to be alone and saw the robe hanging over a chair. He’d changed into it without much thought . . . other than he no longer wanted to be wearing the clothes he’d worn when he knew Kisa. A new outfit, he had told himself, might help give him a fresh perspective.

It didn’t, of course. He left the church feeling just as confused as ever.

Kisa must have realized something truly awful about him to change her mind so quickly. Riq pulled the locket out again. He just needed to get rid of it. All it did was remind him of what happened.

Instead of hurling it into the bushes, though, he fired it at the ground, as hard as he could. Then he sat down on a boulder and looked up into the sky. The moon and stars were out, and he thought how it was the same moon and stars that had hovered over Izamal almost one thousand years ago. The sky didn’t need a time machine to witness all that went on in the world, which included the time he’d spent with Kisa.

The air was warm and humid. Far off to the east he saw storm clouds. He watched them for a few seconds, trying to determine how quickly they were approaching, then he shifted his attention back to the locket on the ground.

He was surprised to see that it had broken into two pieces.

He walked over and picked them up, and stared at the inside of the back half where a single glyph had been written: *observatory*. The handwriting reminded him of the message Kisa had carved into the boulder when she’d left him the snake bracelet.

Riq got chills as he looked up at the tall observatory.

Could it really be Kisa trying to send him a message?

The path that led up to the cave was just past the observatory. If Riq hurried, he could take a quick look inside before heading up the hill.

He shoved the locket pieces back into his bag and took off running.



The two monks near the front entrance didn't pay Riq any mind, most likely because of the robe he was wearing. He was able to duck right inside the huge observatory and check things out. It was quite old though still functioning. Parts of the walls were peeling and cracked. The center of the ground floor was flat, and the roof was open at the very top so that Riq could see the sky. All around the main part of the observatory were doors, maybe a dozen of them.

Riq knew what he was doing was insane — trying to figure out the meaning of a single-glyph clue written almost one thousand years ago. Or maybe it wasn't a clue at all. Maybe it had been written by someone other than Kisa. Or what if Kisa had left the clue for someone else? This version of the observatory didn't even exist yet when she'd tried to hand him the locket.

Another question started circling through his head: Why would a girl give a clue to someone she didn't even want around?

Riq moved around the interior of the observatory anyway, opening every door, peering inside. They were mostly small rooms with new desks and chairs. Three of the doors were locked. One led to a staircase. Riq took the skinny stairs all the way up to the ceiling and looked back down at the ground floor, trying to figure out what might be significant about an observatory. But it was all so ordinary.

There was a thin walkway up near the dome. He stepped out onto it, moved carefully around every inch looking for some other kind of clue. But it was just a walkway. Nothing more. He eventually climbed back down the stairs, passing the ground floor and ducking into the basement. He opened the door and felt his way down the dark hallway, sliding his hands against the wall. He tried a door along the way that was locked. Then he saw that there was an open room at the far end of the hall . . . with what looked like candlelight flickering within.

Riq walked faster through the darkness and peeked inside. There were three women sitting on simple wooden chairs, sorting through wooden boxes. One looked up at Riq, her eyes growing wide with surprise. "Who are you?" she demanded, dropping what looked like another locket inside the box. "And what are you doing in here?"

All three women picked up their sewing and stood up, kicking the boxes behind their feet.

“We’ve been cleared by Brother de Landa to do our embroideries in here,” the shortest of them said.

“They’re for the church,” the first woman added.

“Don’t worry,” Riq told the women, “I’m not a real monk. I was just looking for a girl.” It was clear they weren’t doing anything for the church.

“A girl?” the short woman asked. “No one is allowed to be down here but the three of us with our embroidery.”

“A woman, I mean,” Riq corrected himself. “She lived a long, long time ago. Her name was Kisa.”

The women all looked at one another, shaking their heads.

“Her uncle was King Itchik,” Riq added. “I believe he was responsible for building this observatory.”

“I’ve never heard of anyone named Kisa,” the short woman said. “Or a King Itchik for that matter. Have you?” she asked her friends.

“Never,” they both said.

The taller woman glanced at the box behind her. Then she turned back to Riq and lowered her eyes. He saw that she had a large birthmark on the right side of her face.

Riq nodded. “Thanks for your help —”

“Where are you from?” the woman with the birthmark said, cutting him off.

“Me?” Riq said. He didn’t quite know how to answer. “Well, I’m from . . . a faraway village.”

The woman continued staring at him. “And what is the name of this village?”

Riq leaned against the wall behind him and said, “Oh, it’s very small. Most people have never heard of it.”

The other two women were looking at the woman with the birthmark.

“Anyway,” Riq said, pushing off the wall, “I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

The women remained standing in front of their boxes until Riq left the room.

He hurried back up the stairs and out of the observatory, trying to forget about the cryptic message inside the locket and the women and the fact that there may be additional lockets inside those wooden boxes they

were hiding. Right now he needed to concentrate on finding the boy Bacab had asked him to find.

Riq started up the dark path, toward the cave, when he collided suddenly with someone hurrying back down the path.

They both tumbled into the bushes.

Riq, slightly dazed, raised his head to find a boy lying in the bushes beside him. "Okib?" he asked hesitantly.

The boy sat up and looked at him.

Riq remembered his robe and said, "Don't worry, I'm not a real monk. But is it really you, Okib?"

The boy shrugged and looked around.

Riq scrambled to his feet and leaned down over the boy. "A man named Bacab asked me to find you. He's in the village holding cell with two of my friends, and he claims you'll know what to do."

The boy stood up. He looked about Dak's age. "I knew it!" he cried.

"Knew what?" Riq asked.

"There was nothing left in the cave." The boy wiped a hand down his face. "They took it all. Everything."

"Someone stole from you?" Riq asked.

"The monks did," the boy said. "Why won't they just leave us alone? We're not hurting anyone."

Riq felt the injustice in his chest. "Come," he told the boy. "I'll take you to Bacab."

"No," Okib said. "My brother says I must always wait until deep into the night, when everyone has fallen asleep. Then I will bring him the key."

Riq looked out over Izamal. For the first time since they arrived in this new time period, he wondered about the Break they needed to fix. He'd been moping around long enough. It was time to get back to his life's work: being a Hystorian. "Follow me," he told Okib, with a new sense of determination. "We can wait inside the observatory. You tell me when the time is right to free your people, and I will come along to assist you."

Okib looked up at him, nodding.

They started back down the path together, Riq gripping the locket pieces in his satchel and promising himself he would remain absolutely focused for the remainder of the mission.



## The Other Hystorians

DAK WAS half-asleep and completely aware that he was dreaming, but the dream was a good one so he kept his eyes closed and followed along with the story. He was at Sera's birthday party, just outside her barn, and her uncle had just blindfolded him and handed him a stick. He spun Dak around several times and then let go, saying, "Let her rip!" Dak staggered a little, dizzy, then started hacking at the swinging piñata, which he knew was somewhere in front of him.

He missed twice, then connected on his third try.

On his fourth swing, he reared back and whacked the piñata with all his strength, feeling the side cave in. He could hear the candy start pouring out.

When Dak ripped off the blindfold, he saw that it wasn't candy at all. It was blocks of high-end cheese. All different kinds and sizes. They looked beautiful streaming out onto the thick summer grass. The other kids were already converging with their empty pillowcases, scooping the cheese blocks up with two hands and shoving them inside, and Dak shouted, "Hey, wait for me! I have to get my pillowcase!" But he couldn't find his pillowcase, not anywhere, and all the while more and more kids raced past him, pouncing on what was left from the piñata *he* broke open.

"Wake up," he heard Sera whispering in his ear.

"But they're taking all my cheese," he told her.

"Dak, wake up!" she whispered louder this time.

He opened his eyes, and he saw all the imprisoned Mayas quietly filing out the open door of the prison cell. Sera pulled him to his feet and

they joined the line, and soon they were sneaking past two sleeping monks, ducking out of the building, and hurrying into the night.

Dak followed Sera over to where Riq was standing. Riq pointed toward the towering observatory, and without saying a word, the three of them split off from the others and hurried through the village in that direction.

As they ran, Dak kept looking all around, worried someone might hop out of the bushes and snatch them up. He saw several monks milling around in the square, though it was too dark to see what they were doing. He saw a giant wooden cross leaning up against one of the huts. He saw storm clouds gathering in the distant sky.

Riq opened the observatory doors, ushered Dak and Sera inside, then led them to the far corner of the large room where Dak glanced up at the open roof. The three of them stood there for several quiet seconds, hands on knees, trying to catch their breath and looking all around them.

Sera was the first to straighten back up. She took in a deep breath and said to Riq, “How’d you know the answer was *friendship*?”

Riq took his hands off his knees, too. “A conversation I had with Kisa,” he said, linking his fingers on top of his head and taking a few more deep breaths.

Dak pulled the SQuare out of his breechcloth and said, “Dude, that was almost a thousand years ago. How could it possibly apply to today?”

Riq shook his head. “Trust me, I was just as surprised as you guys.”

Dak powered on the SQuare and brought up the latest riddle — which Riq had yet to see. “Before we look at this I just want to say something, okay? It seems like something really messed up is happening here. Something other than the Break.” Dak looked at Sera. “Once we fix what we’re supposed to fix, if you guys want to help these people in some other way, I’m totally open to that.”

Sera gave him a small smile and said, “Thanks, Dak. Let’s concentrate on the Break for now. We can discuss everything else later on.”

Dak realized it was the first time he’d seen Sera smile in a long time. “I just know it’s important to you,” he said.

“It is.”

Riq cleared his throat. “I wanted to say something, too. It was wrong of me to just wander off like that. I apologize. I also want to assure you I’m as committed to our mission as I’ve ever been.”

“We know you are,” Sera said.

Dak patted Riq on the shoulder. “It’s cool, dude. Just remember, love is a tricky game —”

“Moving right along,” Sera said, pointing at the Square in Dak’s hand.

“Oh. Right.” Dak turned the screen around so Riq and Sera could see. “We were thinking you might be able to help us with this second riddle, Riq.” Dak silently reread the words upside down:

*To save the reproduction of the treasure’s truth, do the following:  
Seek the help of those who follow “the most important thing in the  
world”  
Then dig deep, deeper, deepest, unlocking a long-locked door  
It will take a polyglot to understand the wisdom of the glyphs  
and the forgery of the curse*

“So, we’re supposed to find people who follow friendship,” Riq said.

“Apparently, we already did,” Dak said. “Everyone in the holding cell knew the answer to that question. Well, everyone but Sera.”

“Ha-ha,” Sera said, rolling her eyes. “All of the Mayas in the cell had been in the cave earlier, too. Which means they’re proud of their Mayan roots, right?”

“Exactly.” Dak turned to Riq and said, “We learned from Bacab that the monks have caused a split among the Mayan people. Some are embracing the Spanish influence. Others want to remain loyal to ancient Mayan ways.”

“So, this Break,” Sera said, pointing at Dak, “has to center around something they have stashed in that cave. Most likely —”

“Pacal’s codex,” Dak said.

“It’s not in the cave anymore,” Riq said. “According to Bacab’s little brother, everything’s been cleared out. He told me the monks confiscated it all.”

Dak smacked his own forehead with the heel of his hand. “Dude, I just realized something. Did you guys see the monks in the square on the way over here?”

Riq and Sera both nodded.

Dak turned to Riq. “Back in the cell, Bacab explained that every hut with a secret friendship sculpture out front was storing ancient Mayan



artifacts. The problem is, over the past several weeks they've been transferring everything up to the cave. They thought that would be safer."

Sera's eyes grew big. "They're piling everything into the square!" she shouted. "They're planning to burn it."

"Bingo," Dak said. "And that bonfire, my friend, is what's otherwise known as an *auto-da-fe*."

They all just stared at one another, mouths hanging open in shock, until Dak said, "We have to stop it. Pacal's codex has to be preserved. That's gotta be the Break, right? Which means the one that has survived history is a fake!"

Sera took the Square out of Dak's hands and held it out to Riq. "Do you understand anything else in the riddle?"

"A *polyglot* is someone who can speak or write multiple languages," he said, looking up at Sera.

"Like you, dude," Dak said.

Riq nodded.

"So, we need Riq's language ability," Sera said, "in order to understand the wisdom of the glyphs and the forgery of the curse." She patted Riq on the back. "We're sure glad you came back."

Dak sensed Riq might be feeling a little too good about himself. He opened his mouth to say something sarcastic, but just then he heard someone entering through the front door of the observatory. Dak snatched the Square from Sera and shoved it back into his breechcloth.

"Quick," Riq said. "Follow me." He pulled a candle out of its holder on the wall and started toward one of the doors.

Dak and Sera followed Riq through the door and down a narrow staircase. Then the three of them crept slowly through a dark hall, Riq leading the way with his candle. Dak wasn't sure the basement was the best idea until he spotted an open door at the opposite end.

Riq stopped right in front of it, waiting for Dak and Sera to catch up. Then the three of them looked inside. There was a tall Mayan woman sitting in a chair, holding a wooden box in her lap and grinning. Dak saw she had a birthmark on her cheek.

"I've been waiting for you three," she said.



Dak let Riq and Sera take the two empty chairs and he stood behind them, studying the Mayan woman and the wooden box in her lap. There

were a number of ancient Mayan artifacts inside — including several lockets that resembled the one he'd given to Riq. The woman got up to close the door, and then sat back down and said, "I'm just going to come out and ask: Are you from the future?"

Dak, Sera, and Riq all looked at one another, then Dak turned back to the woman and said, "We are, ma'am."

The woman covered her mouth, and her eyes turned glassy. "I knew it," she said, pointing at Riq. "As soon as you showed up earlier this evening, in that ill-fitting robe, I had this strange feeling in my stomach." She shook her head and said, "Wow. I did not expect to be having *this* conversation tonight."

"My turn to ask a question," Dak said. "Are you a Hystorian?"

"I am."

"What about those two other ladies?" Riq asked. "The ones you were sitting with earlier."

"No, it's just me now." She covered her mouth again, briefly, then took a deep breath and said, "Forgive me. I just . . . I never thought I'd actually live to see the day."

"Finally," Dak said, turning to Sera and Riq. "I was beginning to think there weren't any Hystorians in all of Mesoamerica."

"Oh, no," the woman said. "We're here. Just extremely spread out. In fact, this region is actually the birthplace of the Hystorian presence in the Americas."

"The first Hystorian in the Americas was Mayan?" Sera said. "Who? When?"

"An amazing woman known as Akna," she answered. "A long, long time ago. By the way, I'm María."

"María?" Dak said. "That doesn't sound very Mayan to me."

"It's not. My parents passed away when I was an infant, and I was raised by Spanish nuns. They're the ones who named me. When I got older I began researching my Mayan roots, which is how I stumbled into the underground Hystorian movement. I joined immediately, hoping I could help make tomorrow's world a better and safer place."

Dak, Sera, and Riq introduced themselves to María, and then Riq pulled two locket pieces out of the bag on his belt and held them out. "I came in here earlier because of this."

"Dude, you broke my gift," Dak said. "That hurts."

“See what’s written inside there?” Riq said, turning the locket toward Dak.

“How about a little help?” Dak said. “You know I can’t read glyphs.”

Riq turned the locket halves toward María, who said a single word: “Observatory.”

“We were in this same village a long time ago,” Riq told her, “and I knew a girl named Kisa. She tried to give me a locket like this one when we were leaving, but I dropped it. That’s why I was asking about her earlier tonight. So, you’re sure you’ve never heard of her?”

María shook her head and told him, “But I need to show you something fascinating.” She dug into the wooden box, pulling out several similar-looking ancient lockets. “Each of you take one and open it up,” she said.

Dak opened his and looked at the glyph inside. It was exactly like the one Riq had just shown him.

Riq and Sera held out their open lockets, too.

“They all say ‘observatory,’ ” Riq said.

“We are constantly finding more and more lockets,” María said. “And they all have the same word inside. We still don’t understand why.”

Sera set her locket down. “Kisa was really trying to tell you something, Riq.”

He shrugged but didn’t say anything. Dak could tell the guy was feeling all sensitive again. He made a mental note to lead Riq through a quick seminar on love, as soon as they could carve out the free time.

“We always assumed the author of these messages was Akna,” María said. “That is why previous Hystorians established the observatory as their base. According to legend, Akna was so committed to our cause she worked all the way up until the day she passed away from old age.”

“Whoever wrote it,” Dak said. “Why were they being so vague?”

“She probably worried the information would get into the wrong hands,” Sera said. “Where there are Hystorians, there are usually Time Wardens, too.”

“Of course,” María said. Then she stood up. “Come with me. I’d like to show the three of you something else.”

Dak, Sera, and Riq followed María halfway down the hall, until she stopped, knelt down, and shone her candlelight on a lower portion of the wall. She felt with her fingers along the wall until she came to a small keyhole. “I’ve never mentioned this to anyone,” she said, looking up.

“There’s a locked door here. It’s been this way at least as far back as I go. But we believe there’s a secret room behind this wall. According to legend, it was the meeting place of the first-ever Hystorians in this part of the world, led, of course, by our remarkable founder, Akna.”

Dak saw two tiny snakes were carved into the stone near the keyhole. “Check it out,” he said.

Sera turned to Riq, who had tensed at the sight. “Could two people be that into snakes?” she asked.

“We have to get inside,” Riq said.

Sera nodded. “The riddle says we’re supposed to unlock a long-locked door,” she said. “This has to be it.”

Dak pressed on the small stone door, then tried to rattle it. “Deep, deeper, deepest,” he said. He was getting excited, thinking about all the Hystorian history that might be on the other side of the stone wall. “Talk to us, María. How do we open this bad boy?”

“There is no key,” María said. “Many generations of Hystorians have stood in this very place, wishing they could see what’s inside. But locked out we have remained.”

“Bacab!” Dak shouted, springing to his feet. “We have to track that dude down ASAP! He’s a locksmith!”



## The Way Events Unfolded

IT DIDN'T take long for Sera to see what the Mayan people were up against.

As she, Dak, and Riq hurried away from the observatory, they passed the village square, where several Franciscan monks were tossing ancient Mayan artifacts onto a massive pile. It was dawn now so Sera could see it all clearly. A few monks were tucking kindling into the pile. Two dozen or so armed Spanish men stood in a circle around the monks, almost daring village locals to interfere. Sera noticed that all the guards from the prison were part of the circle. So were the men who'd forced the Mayas out of the cave.

One monk seemed to be overseeing the entire operation.

Sera studied him as they moved past the scene. She knew he must be the infamous Diego de Landa.



Bacab wasn't at his hut.

They found him at a nearby ball court, huddled with several other Mayan men, including his younger cousin, K'inich.

"Bacab," Sera said, half out of breath, "have you seen what the monks are doing in the square?"

"I know what they're doing, little sister." He turned around, showing the crossbow in his hands. "It is why we are preparing for battle."

"But they're sitting there waiting for you!" Sera shouted.

"And they're heavily armed," Riq added.

"If they try to burn our history, we will stand up against them," Bacab said. He grinned at Sera. "I'm not afraid to risk my life for what's right." Then he turned back to his men and began barking instructions.

She spun around to face Dak and Riq. “I have to help them,” she said.

“Sera, we need you,” Riq said.

“The best way to help them,” Dak said, “is to fix this Break. We can change the way the world perceives the Mayan people forever.”

Sera was so confused. She felt a strange, unexplainable loyalty toward these people — like they were family. And if they were willing to risk their lives, she felt like she should, too. But the rational side of Sera knew Dak was right. If they fixed the Break, made sure the right codex survived the burning, the Maya would no longer be famous for declaring the SQ saviors of the world. Maybe instead they’d be celebrated for their actual wisdom and . . . scientific achievements. Sera never thought she’d consider the Maya scientific, but that’s exactly what they were.

She turned back to Bacab. “We need your help getting into a room in the observatory.”

“Can it wait until after our battle in the square?” K’inich said, frowning at her. “You may have noticed, Bacab is a little preoccupied at the moment.”

“I’m sorry, but it can’t wait,” Sera said flatly. “Bacab, do you have keys to the doors in the observatory basement?”

“If it is a lock in this village,” Bacab said, “I have the key.”

“And what is in the basement?” K’inich asked.

“There’s a room we think might be very important to us,” Dak said.

Bacab stood there, looking out over the horizon. “It would be much easier if this could wait.”

“Or you could just give us the keys,” Dak suggested. “We’d bring them back as soon as we were done.”

“Only a locksmith handles a locksmith’s keys,” Bacab said.

“I will take them,” K’inich said, tossing down the coil of rope he’d been holding. He picked up his crossbow and said, “Bacab, you stay here and continue your preparations. I will hurry back.”

“You’ll really take us?” Dak asked.

“Obviously you are desperate,” K’inich said. “So, we will go.”

“You know where the keys are,” Bacab said. “Come back as soon as you can. We will need every man this morning.”

K’inich took off in a jog toward Bacab’s hut.

Sera, Dak, and Riq were right on his heels.



K'inich was a very calm and composed man. That was what stood out most to Sera as they walked past the village square on their way back to the observatory. Dak and Riq were a few steps behind, talking. So Sera was free to watch K'inich as he studied the Spanish men guarding the pile of Mayan artifacts. He showed no emotion.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Sera asked him.

"It bothers me very much," K'inich said. "Because it is unjust and ignorant. They do not wish to tolerate what they do not understand."

Sera shook her head. "If I had that crossbow you're wearing, I'd be tempted to fire off a few arrows right about now."

K'inich only smiled at her.

Once the square was well behind them, he said, "I would like to tell you the story of two boys."

It seemed like an odd time to tell a story, but Sera thought K'inich was intriguing, so she told him, "I'd love to hear a story."

"Wait," Dak said. "What story? We want to hear the story, too."

"Many years ago," K'inich began, "two young boys went out on a raft with one of the most respected elders of their village. This would be both boys' first fishing trip. One of them was the son of the king. The other was a neighborhood boy who the king's son was fond of. They went out into the deeps where the fish were known to bite. The neighborhood boy took to fishing right away. He caught three fish within the first hour. The king's son didn't fare quite as well. He had trouble casting his line. The elder assured him it was simply bad luck. A little while later, the weather began to change."

K'inich paused as he swung open the observatory door and held out his hand for Sera, Dak, and Riq to enter.

"What happened next?" Dak asked as soon as they were all inside.

Sera had no idea how the story applied to anything she'd said, but she was curious, too.

"The elder told the boys they must head for shore right away," K'inich continued. "But the king's son had other ideas. He demanded that they remain in the ocean until he caught a fish, too. He threatened to tell his father if the elder failed to respect his wishes. 'You would lose your standing in the village,' he said. The elder pointed to the swirling sky and told the king's son they were in danger, and he began paddling toward the shore."

They were at the stairs now and K'inich descended them slowly. "On their way in," he said, "the sea grew very rough. A powerful wave rose up and slammed into the wooden raft. The neighborhood boy's fish all washed back into the ocean. Then a second wave appeared, this one bigger and stronger. It picked up the small raft and slammed it back down against the sea. The raft collapsed underneath them, leaving the two boys and the elder alone in the rough water, with nothing to keep them afloat. It was a desperate situation for the elder. Neither boy could swim, and he knew he would only have the strength to save one boy. He turned to them, both thrashing around, fighting to keep their heads above water.

"It was an impossible dilemma. He cared for both boys. But when another large swell rose up in the sea behind them, the elder chose. He grabbed the shirt of the neighborhood boy and held tight as the waves crashed over the top of them, forcing them both underwater. He fought against the current and made it to the surface, holding the boy's face out of the water. Then he swam with his one free hand toward the shore. And eventually they made it."

Sera stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "What happened to the king's son? Did he die?"

"You can't leave us hanging," Dak said.

Sera noticed that Riq seemed far less interested. She tapped the back of his elbow and mouthed, "You okay?"

He nodded.

"The king's son washed ashore several minutes later," K'inich said. "He had drowned. The elder told the truth that night when the king came to see him. He said he understood in the sea that he would only be able to save one boy, and he had chosen the neighborhood boy. The king ordered the elder to be put to death the following morning. Just before the elder was to be sacrificed, the neighborhood boy snuck over to the holding cell, sobbing, and begged the elder to tell him why he hadn't chosen the king's son. And do you know what the elder said?"

"What?" Dak said. "Tell us."

K'inich glanced at Sera and smiled. "He told the boy that he knew the choice he made in the sea would be negative in the short term. He would pay with his life. But in the long term he believed it would prove to be the most beneficial. 'How is that possible?' the boy cried. 'Because tomorrow,' the elder explained, 'you are going to go see a group of



people who are very important to me. And you're going to listen to what they have to say. And if my instincts are correct, you will carry their important message into future generations.' ”

María came hurrying out of the room at the end of the hall holding a candle. “You found the key?” she asked.

K'inich held up the massive key ring for her to see, then he began sifting through them, looking for the right one.

Sera watched nervously as the first two keys he tried failed to work.

“So, I must've missed something,” Dak said to Sera. “Why was he telling that story?”

“He's right here,” Sera said. “Why don't you ask him?”

“How about it, K'inichy?” Dak said.

K'inich was too preoccupied to answer. The third and fourth keys failed as well. But the fifth slid right into the lock and turned easily. K'inich shoved open the heavy stone door, saying, “After you, my friends.”

Sera was the first one inside. She expected to see all kinds of Mayan artifacts, but the room was completely empty. She walked to the far wall, studying the floor along the way. It looked like there were fresh drag marks.

“I don't understand,” María said. “According to all the records, this is the room.”

“Looks like you got some bad intel,” Dak said.

Riq tapped Sera on the arm and motioned back at K'inich, who was still hovering by the door. “Are we sure we trust —”

“I'll tell you the point of the story,” K'inich interrupted, gripping the top of the door frame.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Sometimes we must do things that are detrimental in the short term because we know they will prove advantageous in the long term. There is nothing left in this room because I cleared it all out. The artifacts you thought you'd find are at the bottom of the pile in the village square.”

María fell to her knees. “What are you saying, K'inich?” she cried.

The realization hit Sera like a ton of bricks. “He's a Time Warden,” she said.

Dak started marching toward K'inich with his fists clenched, but K'inich only smiled as he pulled an arrow from the pouch on his shoulder. He loaded it into his crossbow and raised it at Dak, who

stopped in his tracks. “I am a proud Maya,” K’inich said. “And in the short term, it will be painful to see the legacy of my people turned into ash. See, Diego de Landa will only allow one codex to survive for historical purposes. It shall be the only legacy of the Mayan people. He selected a codex from ancient Izamal, written by a legendary scribe named Pacal. But we have composed our own codex, which reveals the SQ as the rightful savior of the world. It is the perfect opportunity to spread our message far and wide. For the long term, this is what has to be done.”

“You’re selling out your own people!” Sera shouted.

“I’m advancing an ideology,” K’inich said. “Now, please, hand over what’s in your satchel. From the second I saw you two enter the holding cell I suspected you might be from the future.”

“Is de Landa a Time Warden, too?” Dak asked.

K’inich looked appalled. “That man could never be part of our movement. He’s too blinded by religious zealotry. But he’ll make a fine tool.” He turned back to Sera. “Now hand over your time-travel device.”

“I’ll never give it to you,” Sera said through her gritted teeth.

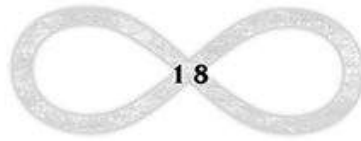
K’inich pointed the arrow right at her forehead. “You have three seconds,” he said, pulling back on the cocking stirrup.

Riq ripped open Sera’s satchel, pulled out the Ring, and set it on the ground in front of her.

“No!” Sera screamed as K’inich reached down to pick it up.

He backed through the doorway, lowering his crossbow. “In case you were wondering,” he said, “the neighborhood boy in the story was me. Sometimes destiny finds the man, instead of the man finding his destiny. If the elder who saved my life had been a Hystorian, instead of a Time Warden, who knows? I may have been on your side. But that is not the way events unfolded.”

K’inich slammed closed the stone door, and Sera heard the click of the lock.



## Follow the Snakes

RIQ CURSED himself as he watched Sera pound the stone wall with the undersides of her fists. Why hadn't he trusted his instincts? From the second K'inich had volunteered to accompany them to the observatory, Riq had been skeptical of his motivation. Before that even . . . when he'd asked Sera what she was looking for in the observatory basement. And that story about the two boys in the sea. Riq had sensed all along that something wasn't right. But he had done nothing to stop it. Zero. And now look where they were.

He watched María pacing all around the room with her candle, watched Dak sit against the wall, letting his face fall into his hands. Sera turned around with a panicked look on her face and said, "What now? We'll never get out of here." She looked right at Riq. "Why'd you let him have the Ring?"

"I couldn't let him hurt you," Riq said.

"I'd rather take an arrow in the chest than be stuck in here forever," she said.

"They're probably torching Pacal's codex as we speak," Dak said. "You know, the one we were supposed to protect?"

"I've always known there was an SQ presence here," María said. "But I never once considered Bacab's cousin."

"So, what are we supposed to do?" Sera said. "Sit here and wait for our air to run out? Because that's what'll probably happen."

Dak, Sera, and María continued on like this as Riq began walking around the room, studying every inch of the dark walls. María's candle gave just enough light that he could see. After several minutes he spotted

something that made the hairs on his arms stand up. A tiny snake had been carved into one of the stones.

Then another snake, even smaller, on the stone below it.

“And why are *you* so quiet?” Dak shouted at Riq’s back. “You don’t care that we’re all going to die in this tomb?”

Riq ignored Dak and kept scanning farther down the wall. He found a third snake. Then a fourth.

“I know you hear me, Lover Boy!”

“Leave him alone, Dak,” Sera said. “Just, please, be quiet for once in your life.”

“What did I do to you?” Dak snapped back at her.

María moved in closer to Riq and held her candle to the wall so he could see better. “What are you looking at?” she asked.

“There’s a pattern of tiny engravings on the wall,” Riq told her. “They go all the way down to the floor.”

Sera came to look at them, too. “They’re snakes,” she said. “Hold on a sec. Dak, get over here with the SQuare.”

“Oh, I can’t even get a ‘please’ now?”

Riq turned around, saw Sera take the SQuare from Dak, power it on, and quickly pull up the riddle. “ ‘Dig deep, deeper, deepest,’ ” she read. She looked up at Riq and Dak and said, “What if this isn’t the deepest room in the observatory?”

“Kisa’s trying to tell us something,” Riq said, scanning stones again. The tiny snake engravings clearly descended all the way down the wall. But the stone closest to the floor had *two* snakes. Maybe that stone was the most significant. He dropped to his knees and began feeling all around the stone. But it felt no different than the others.

“What is it?” Dak asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Riq told him. He stood up and studied every stone that had a snake on it, starting up near the ceiling. He had to figure this out. What was Kisa trying to tell him? All he saw was a solid stone wall.

“Is there a hidden door or something?” Sera asked.

“What am I not seeing?” Riq mumbled to himself. He felt all around the stones on either side of the ones with snakes. Then he studied the actual engravings. But nothing stood out to him. He grew so frustrated he stood up and punched the wall with a closed fist, which really hurt, so he kicked the stone with two snakes.

A strange thing happened.

The stone he kicked moved a few centimeters into the wall.

Riq turned to look at Dak and Sera, their eyes wide with anticipation.

Riq knelt down and pushed the stone farther and farther into the wall until it revealed a small latch. Riq undid the latch and moved a thick piece of leather to the side to grab the handle underneath. He pulled on it with all his strength. All of the sudden, a small part of the floor came up, revealing a narrow opening that led to a dark staircase.

They all looked at each other, and Sera repeated, “ ‘Deep, deeper, deepest.’ ”

“This is amazing!” Dak shouted. “I should have been an architect.”

The four of them climbed down the narrow stairs, one at a time, Riq now holding María’s candle to light the way. When he got to the bottom, he held up the candle and scanned the small room. There was an old wooden desk and a chair. The walls were full of glyphs. The shelves around the desk were covered with rusted lockets and antiquated paintbrushes.

“Oh, wow,” Sera said behind him.

“What?” Dak said.

Riq followed Sera’s eyes to the floor underneath the desk where there was a full skeleton. His eyes grew big, and he walked over to it and leaned down to get a better look with the candle. There was an open locket near the skeleton’s hand. Inside, the glyph for *observatory* was only half finished. He fell to his knees near the skeleton, fighting back tears. He knew in his heart it had to be Kisa.

“Guys!” Dak shouted.

Riq spun around, saw that Dak was holding a codex in his hands.

“Is that what I think it is?” Sera asked.

Riq pulled himself together, got up, and walked over to Dak. He looked at the first panel of the codex. And there it was: the symbol of the ceiba tree. The writing looked slightly different from Pacal’s, which told Riq it was a reproduction. He looked up as Sera quoted from the riddle, “ ‘To save the reproduction of the treasure’s truth . . .’ ”

“A copy of Pacal’s codex. We found it,” Dak said. He took the candle from Riq and circled it all around the room. “Do you know how incredible this is? There probably hasn’t been another living soul in this place for hundreds and hundreds of years. At least since she kicked the

bucket, right?” He pointed at the skeleton. “I’d assume if anyone found her they’d give her a proper burial.”

“I can’t believe it,” María said. “All along this has been under my feet.”

Riq took the candle from Dak and put it in the candleholder on the wall. Now the entire room was dimly lit.

“Um, you guys?” Sera said, pointing at the far wall. “I just found a glyph etched into a stone near this handle. Can you read it, Riq?”

Riq moved closer to her and read the glyph. “It’s an exit,” he said.

“Are you kidding me?” Dak started jumping up and down. “There’s another way out of here! This Snake Woman was a genius!”

“Easy,” Sera warned him. “Let’s make sure we can get out before we start patting ourselves on the back. Even then, we still have a lot of work to do switching codices with the monks.”

“Come on, Sera,” Dak said. “Where’s that positive attitude?”

Dak, Sera, and María started trying to turn the handle built into the wall. They barely got it to budge. Sera called out, “Riq, get over here and help us. This thing’s rusted in place.”

Riq ignored her because he’d just spotted a thin block of wood with a series of painted glyphs. It looked like a letter, placed on the desk for someone to find. Riq picked it up and began reading, his heart now thumping inside his chest.

Dear Future Hystorian,

If you are reading this note it means you have found your way into the birthplace of the Hystorians movement among our people. When I was just a girl, the king of Izamal promised me a secret room below the basement of his new observatory where I could organize a Hystorian presence. But the king didn’t stop there; he built a secret room underneath the secret room. A great many discussions have taken place between these walls. But now I am old, and I fear the end is near. I ask that you help get this message into the hands of the time travelers that may happen to pass through our village a second time.

I initiated the Hystorian presence here because, when I was young, I encountered these three time travelers, and it changed the course of my life. They came during the great storm, and they

helped the king maintain possession of our most sacred tool of learning, Pacal's codex. Thousands of young students have been taught from this codex during my lifetime. I can't imagine our village without it.

Riq tried to swallow the lump in his throat. He looked up, saw Dak, Sera, and María all straining to turn the rusted handle. He then looked all around the room and glanced down at the skeleton again. All of it seemed so surreal. Kisa's presence. Her bones beneath the desk. He remembered the young girl he'd sat with at the mouth of the cave. She was so smart and pretty. She made him want to be somebody. And then, in the time it took to snap his fingers, Riq had warped to a different time, and the girl from Izamal had lived an entire life and grown old and died. He turned back to the letter, overwhelmed with emotion.

All my life I'd longed to do something special. When I was young I believed it was art and jewelry. But that changed when I met the time travelers. They arrived with one mission: to save the world. And I realized one day that I could help them by continuing their work. I have been a defender of scholars, and a scholar myself; I have traveled to faraway villages with a message of peace and cooperation; I have warned all Maya to stay vigilant, and to oppose the SQ whenever they might appear on our shores.

The small group of local young people I have trained now refer to me as Akna, after the goddess of motherhood. Even though I never had a child of my own, the name stuck. Most of them went off to other villages to extend our presence. I have done this for over fifty years now. It is my legacy. And I owe my life as a Hystorian to one beautiful young time traveler who walked into my uncle's hut during the great storm.

"Riq, come on!" Sera shouted.

"We got this bad boy open!" Dak shouted. "No thanks to you!"

Riq looked up from the letter, saw Dak, Sera, and María slowly pulling open the door. Behind it he saw yet another set of narrow stone

stairs. “One second,” he managed to call out to them. And then he turned to the last paragraph of the letter.

Please, Future Hystorian, if you ever happen across these three time travelers, deliver this message to the one named Riq. Tell him my life would never have been what it is if I hadn't spent those three days with him. Tell him he made me believe I could be anything. Tell him he gave me the strength to insist he leave Izamal and continue with his mission, even though I cried for six weeks after with a broken heart. It was the most important decision I ever made, because the world could not be saved without him. And last, Future Hystorian, if this time traveler named Riq ever comes back to Izamal, tell him that Kisa will always remember him, even after I am gone from this earth. Because if it wasn't for our powerful friendship, I never would have fulfilled my destiny as a Hystorian.

“Come on, Riq!” Sera shouted again.

Riq looked up at her, his chest so full it felt like it might burst. The door was open, and Dak and María were already climbing the stairs.

“What's wrong with you?” Sera said. “We have to replace the SQ codex and get back the Ring!”

Riq nodded, set the piece of wood back on the desk, and hurried toward Sera. Before he followed her up the stairs, he took one last look around Kisa's secret room. He remembered seeing her for the first time inside Itchik's hut. That strange feeling in his stomach when their eyes first met. Finally, he understood what it meant.

Riq turned and hurried up the dark stairs, knowing that nothing could stop him now. He was a Hystorian. Just like Kisa was a Hystorian.

And from this point on, he would be as committed to the mission as she had been.





## Lover Boy Strikes Back

DAK HEAVED open the heavy metal hatch, popped his head above the tall grass, and sucked in a deep breath of fresh air. The first thing he saw was smoke billowing into the sky. The monks were already torching everything. Then he noticed the sky itself, which was dull and gray and filled with angry-looking storm clouds.

The secret underground staircase had led to almost the exact spot where they'd warped in: just behind the observatory, in an overgrown patch of wild grass. Dak thought back to when they first arrived and how he'd hardly noticed the grass. Little did he know that it hid a secret passageway that would save their lives. He switched the codex to his left hand and reached down to help María up through the hatch. Then he helped Sera. He stared down into the darkness for a few long seconds, right hand extended, waiting for Riq. But the staircase remained empty.

He turned to Sera. "Where's Lover Boy?"

At that exact moment, Riq came springing up out of the darkness.

Dak noticed the newfound look of determination on the guy's face. Probably because he got to snoop through all of Snake Girl's stuff. He made another mental note about that love seminar he wanted to lead.

"They've already started," Sera said, pointing at the smoke.

"Let's go fix a Break," Dak said, and he took off running toward the square with the codex tucked under his arm like a football. When he glanced back a few seconds into his run, he saw that Sera, Riq, and María were right on his heels.



When they got to the village square, Dak ducked behind a tree to catch his breath and study what was going on. The others sidled up next

to him.

There was a massive contained fire burning, its flames shooting twenty feet into the air. Many Mayan people were standing all around the fire, watching their history go up in smoke. Some were holding one another and crying. Others were shouting at the monks. A few were being led away from the square in shackles.

One monk stood at the center of the entire spectacle, waving around a codex as he shouted over the commotion about heaven and hell and the deceitfulness of the devil. Dak couldn't believe the surreal quality of the proceedings. The raging fire and the billowing smoke. De Landa's passionate preaching. The storm clouds hovering ominously over everything, occasionally lit up by a lightning flash.

Back home, Dak had always been drawn to the darker moments of history. He'd climb his favorite tree and read for hours about executions and wars and coups. He could still remember the day he encountered an article about de Landa's *auto-da-fe*, which wiped out at least forty Mayan codices and over twenty thousand cult images. It had amazed him that a monk could be responsible for the torching of an entire civilization's history. But only now did he understand the depth of the man's actions. You just had to look at the faces of the Mayan people watching. It made Dak feel sick to his stomach.

"There they are," Sera said, pointing to the right of the fire. "Bacab and his men. They're coming."

Dak saw them marching toward the village square, a few antiquated weapons cocked and loaded. He understood they'd be no match for the Spanish. Then he spotted K'inich, walking right alongside the brave Mayas, everyone oblivious to the fact that he was using this cultural genocide as an opportunity to advance the SQ agenda.

Dak turned to the others and shouted over the growing commotion, "The monk who's preaching is obviously Diego de Landa."

"And now it will all be burned!" de Landa shouted at the crowd. "And your souls will be cleansed of evil, making it possible for you to see the truth. There is no other way. I will keep only this one document, so future leaders of the church can know what led an entire people to live in darkness!"

"He has no idea he's waving around a fake codex," Sera said.

Dak held up the reproduction of Pacal's codex. "We have to make the switch. Without him knowing, of course. Because he'd never trust us."

“I’ll do it,” Riq said. “I’m the only one dressed like a monk.”

A shot rang out.

Dak spun around, saw one of Bacab’s men fall to the ground, holding his chest and choking on his own blood. Another shot was fired. Another man fell.

“They’re shooting people!” Sera shouted.

Bacab and the rest of his men scattered, taking cover behind trees and boulders and nearby huts. The scene grew louder with weapons being fired and people yelling and thunder pounding in the sky.

Dak turned back to his friends. “Listen to me!” he shouted. “Riq, same plan as in 638! You hide this one in your robe. I’m going to swipe the one de Landa’s holding. You chase me down like you’re one of them and we’ll switch, okay?”

Riq nodded.

“They’ll shoot you, Dak!” Sera cried.

“It’s far too dangerous!” María shouted.

Dak looked up when a light rain started to fall. “Kisa did her part,” he told them. “Now it’s time to do ours.” He winked at Riq and moved out from behind the tree.

Thunder crashed overhead as Dak snuck closer to de Landa and the fire. He could already feel the heat seeping into his skin. As soon as de Landa turned his back, still ranting about the devil, Dak darted toward him.

One of the Spaniards shouted at Dak. Another turned and fired an arrow that whistled past Dak’s left ear. De Landa turned around just as Dak got to him, but Dak acted quickly, knocking the codex out of his hand, scooping it up, and sprinting away.

Two more arrows whizzed past his head.

Then he heard Riq shouting in Spanish over the commotion, “I’ve got him! I’ve got the little thief!”

Riq leapt onto Dak, not only knocking him over but driving his face into the mud near the fire. “You will pay for what you’ve done!” Riq screamed in his ear, while at the same time slipping Pacal’s codex out of his robe. He traded with Dak on the sly, still screaming at him, and then he slugged Dak right in the jaw.

Dak lost his senses for a few seconds, and when he came to he was holding his face and shouting back at Riq in English, “Dude, that wasn’t

part of the plan!” But then he looked up and saw three Spaniards aiming arrows at his head.

Riq threw Dak into a tight headlock and ripped Pacal’s codex out of his hands. “I have it!” he shouted at the other monks. “Here! Take this back to Brother de Landa! I’ll see that this thief pays with his life!”

One of the Spaniards reached for the codex and started toward the preaching man. The other two turned their attention elsewhere.

As Riq aggressively led Dak away, they both snuck glances behind them until they saw that de Landa had possession of Pacal’s codex and had resumed his preaching.

“You didn’t have to hit me in the jaw,” Dak said to Riq.

“It was the only way,” Riq told him. And then he glanced down at Dak, grinning slightly, and added, “Oh, and I’d prefer you didn’t refer to me as ‘Lover Boy.’ ”

Dak rolled his eyes, then ordered Riq to guide him closer to the fire so he could torch the SQ codex. “No one will ever read these lies again,” he said.

They only made it a few steps closer, though, before getting bowled over. Dak pulled his face from the mud again and looked up. It was K’inich, who shouted, “I saw what you just did!”

The SQ codex had fallen out of Riq’s robe, into the mud, and the three of them wrestled for it. “Give it to me!” K’inich shouted. “Now!” He punched Riq in the side of the face and reached for the loose codex, but Dak was too quick. He pounced on it, clutching it to his chest and curling his body into a ball. K’inich slugged him in the kidneys and the back of his head, and then Riq wrestled K’inich’s arms behind his back.

The rain fell harder.

Thunder exploded directly over their heads.

Dak squeezed the codex to his chest as Riq and K’inich fell on top of him, ripping and clawing at each other’s faces.

A monk suddenly hurried over with a raised gun, shouting, “Stop! Stop! Get off him!”

Dak relaxed some, assuming the monk was ordering K’inich to get off Riq, but when he looked up, he saw the monk cracking Riq in the back of the head with the butt of his gun.

K’inich scurried to his feet and handed over the Infinity Ring, shouting at the monk, “Throw it into the fire! I’ll take care of the codex!” He took the gun from the monk and stuck it into Dak’s ear, shouting,

“That’s right! The SQ has men on *both* sides!” He shackled Dak’s and Riq’s wrists and began pushing them away from the square.

As they were led away, Dak turned and watched the monk hurrying toward the fire with the Ring.

“Sera!” Dak shouted.

She was beside Bacab now, who was aiming his crossbow at de Landa. He fired an arrow that narrowly missed. Two monks converged on de Landa immediately, pushing his head down and leading him toward a nearby hut. Dak saw that de Landa was still clutching Pacal’s codex.

Lightning lit up the massive storm clouds.

Thunder pounded so forcefully it shook the earth under Dak’s feet.

Everywhere he looked Spaniards were shackling Mayas. The fire roared, all of Izamal’s history quickly turning to ash. He spotted the monk still marching the Ring toward the flames.

“Sera!” Dak shouted again.

K’inich stopped leading him and Riq away long enough to bash the gun against the side of Dak’s head. “Quiet!” he shouted. “I don’t know how you got out, but I will now get rid of you once and for all! No one can stop our mission!”

Sera screamed.

Dak looked up, saw that she had leapt onto the back of the SQ monk who had the Infinity Ring. He elbowed her off and kicked her in the gut.

“No!” Dak shouted.

K’inich smashed him in the ear again. Dak shuddered in pain. He opened his eyes in time to see the monk wind up and heave the Ring all the way into the middle of the raging fire.

Bacab threw down his crossbow and sprinted right into the fire to retrieve it. He disappeared for several seconds, then came racing back out, his hair and clothes in flames, and tossed the Ring to safety. He then dove into the mud and rolled around until the flames were extinguished. He hopped back up, badly burned, and picked up the Ring.

“Watch out!” Sera screamed from the ground.

A Spaniard had stepped out from behind a large boulder, aiming a crossbow right at Bacab. He fired, the arrow burrowing into Bacab’s back.

Bacab dropped to his knees, arching his back and reaching a hand behind himself, trying to touch the arrow.

“Bacab!” Sera shouted, struggling to her feet.

The monk reloaded and fired a second arrow, this one sinking into Bacab’s right thigh.

Dak watched another Mayan man finally pounce on the monk, ripping the crossbow out of his hands. And he watched Sera sprint to Bacab, helping him to his feet, throwing his arm around her shoulder. She started half-carrying him out of the chaotic scene.

More lightning flashed.

Dak was entirely helpless.

K’inich pulled him and Riq behind a hut, and threw them on the ground. He raised the gun at them, shouting, “Now you will die!”

Dak squeezed closed his eyes and waited for the sound of the shot that would end his life.

He heard a crashing sound instead, and when he looked up, he saw María standing over K’inich’s motionless body, holding a large, jagged rock in her hands. Her eyes were full of tears as she looked at Dak and Riq and said, “I will never let Akna’s work be in vain.”

Dak glanced at Riq, then watched María take the gun and keys off K’inich and hurry over to unlock the shackles. She tried several keys before finally inserting the right one and freeing them. Dak flexed his hands for a few seconds, then ripped the SQ codex out of K’inich’s limp hands and raced out from behind the hut, toward the fire.

It was smaller now because the rain was stronger, but Dak knew it would burn the SQ’s lies just the same. As he flung the thing deep into the flames, he slipped in the wet mud. He watched from his knees as the fake codex caught fire. Some of the pages twisted under the intense heat, then shriveled up into brittle red and black sheets, the embers eventually breaking off and lifting up into the stormy sky.

Now the world would never know the lies and propaganda of the SQ’s codex. They’d learn the truth about the Maya instead. Some of it.

Dak breathed heavily as he continued watching the fire.

More thunder pounded overhead and the skies opened up.

Rain poured down on Dak’s head, flooding the ground around him, forcing the few remaining monks to cower and run for shelter. But Dak couldn’t take his eyes off the fire. Yes, they’d fixed the Break, but they’d failed to stop de Landa’s *auto-de-fe*. And Dak was overwhelmed by how much had been lost today. He realized what a vile and violent act it was to destroy a culture’s history. It was almost like murder.

Lightning lit up the dark storm clouds again.

Thunder roared.

Dak sensed someone hovering over him, and when he looked up, he found a drenched Riq standing there, holding out his hand to Dak.



## Beneath the Ceiba Tree

“PLEASE, JUST talk to me,” Bacab said to Sera.

Tears were falling down her cheeks, but she didn’t care. Bacab was badly hurt. He said he knew he wouldn’t make it and refused to let her take him to the village medicine man.

“Talk about what?” Sera asked, wiping her face with the back of her hand.

“It does not matter, little sister. Tell me about your life. Your family.”

Sera watched the way his entire body shivered in the warm, humid air. She looked out from behind the large ceiba tree they had ducked beneath, trying to figure out what she could tell a dying man. Rain poured down all around them. Large drops sometimes slipped through the thick tree leaves and landed on their heads. She had tried the door to the hut in front of them, but it was locked. And nobody had answered when she knocked, even though she was sure there were people inside.

“Please,” he said, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the trunk of the tree. “Anything.”

Sera squeezed Bacab’s cold hand until he opened his eyes again. “It’s only me and my uncle Diego,” she said.

“No parents?” Bacab asked in a strained voice.

Sera shook her head. “I never knew them.”

The wind picked up, swirling around Sera and Bacab and their tree. The leaves rustled wildly. Sera heard a thick branch snap, but when she looked up she didn’t see anything.

“Tell me more,” Bacab said.

“I had a dream about them,” she said, wiping mud from Bacab’s brow. “My parents. I was in the future. Thousands of years from now,



when the world was ending. I went to my uncle's barn and opened the door. And there they were, sitting in chairs, waiting for me."

"That's right," Bacab said.

Sera wiped the tears from her face again and said, "They came back because they cared about me."

"Of course they did." Bacab coughed and reached down to touch the arrow in his thigh. "You will see them again."

Sera let out a sob and then quickly stopped herself. "I'm sorry, Bacab. This was all my fault. You were trying to help me."

"Since I was a little boy," he said in almost a whisper, "I wanted to be a leader of people. *My people.*" He coughed and wiped his mouth. "My father always warned me, though. He said, 'Bacab, if you want to be someone special you must have strong shoulders.' I didn't understand until now."

Sera's heart was pounding in her chest. It was exactly what her grandfather had said to her. The one time they'd met. She stared at Bacab, trying to swallow the lump in her throat.

The sky lit up in a massive flash of lightning.

Thunder rumbled directly overhead.

"What about you, little sister?" Bacab asked. "Do you have strong shoulders?"

Sera sobbed again, and this time when she tried to catch herself, she wasn't able to. She just kept on crying.

"I think you do," he said, grinning a little. "And I sense things." He coughed hard and then pulled in a deep breath. "About people."

Tears streamed down Sera's face, and she tried for a deep breath, too. But she couldn't get one. She was too upset. "Bacab," she said. She wanted to say something important, something meaningful and comforting. But the words weren't coming into her head and all she could think to do was say his name again. "Bacab."

When he didn't answer, she let herself sob into her own hands.

Because she knew.

He was gone.

After several seconds she leaned his head back against the trunk of the ceiba tree and pushed closed his eyelids. "I'm proud to come from you," she whispered.

Then she leaned her head against the tree, too, and watched the growing storm.



A few minutes later, Dak and Riq were there. Dak gripped the Infinity Ring in his hands. Riq was fiddling with his bracelet.

Sera looked up at them, both soaking wet. She wiped her face and climbed to her feet.

“Sera,” Dak started. But then he noticed Bacab and said, “Oh.”

Riq gently patted her on the shoulder. “Some of the villagers have warned us that the storm will be getting much worse,” he said. “But we can stay here a little longer if you want.”

“It’s a storm,” Dak said. “But I don’t think it’s going to be as bad as they were saying.”

Sera took the Infinity Ring from Dak and programmed in the new coordinates Riq showed her on the SQuare. She looked up at Dak and Riq and said, “If the Maya say a great storm is coming, then a great storm is coming.”

They nodded.

“Better hold on if you’re coming with me,” she said.

Dak and Riq both put their hands on the Ring next to hers, and she pushed the button that would send them warping through time yet again. The Ring began to vibrate, and the liquid inside lit up and swirled. Sera looked out at the blurring Mayan landscape, feeling sad but also incredibly full. She turned to look at Bacab, thinking how the next time someone in school drew her great-great-great-grandmother sitting on a Mayan temple, she would not feel embarrassed. She would feel proud.

Everything around them began to blur. Dak said to Riq, “Show her.”

Riq held up an open locket. Sera expected to see a Mayan glyph in the last second before they warped away. But it was something else altogether.

“Is that . . . Chinese?” she asked.

Just as Dak opened his mouth to answer, they were whisked away into blackness.



Turn the page for your Hystorian's Guide to the Great Wall of China.

An SQ army is about to attack a deserted section of the Great Wall of China. You need to alert the Chinese army and prevent the invaders from breaking through! This is your strategy guide for staying alive.

Unlock the full game at:  
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# INFINITY RING™



SLEEPING  
DRAGON

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## MEM<sup>∞</sup> FROM ARIN

---



In this Break you'll be going up against an entire army — but don't let that scare you. I know that you've got the wits and guts to get the job done.

Here's the scoop: A Manchu army, led by the SQ, is about to attack a poorly guarded section of the Great Wall. You'll need to alert the Hystorian and the Chinese army so that together you can prevent the invaders from breaking through.

If they manage to get past your defenses, the wall won't be the only thing to fall — the Ming Dynasty will also come crashing down!

— Arin



## ULTIMATE SOLDIERS

The **MANCHU** came from the northeast, but quickly picked up many of the customs of the Chinese.

The uniform for a lower-ranking Manchu officer was made in the color of the battalion to which he belonged. The armor was often a quilted coat covered with thin plates of metal.



# MANCHU

## SUPREME FIGHTERS



This flexible armor is designed to protect soldiers from archers. It's not as effective at close range, where a swordsman could cut the lacing holding it together.

The Ming Dynasty was one of the most stable dynasties in Chinese history. They were ruled by a powerful emperor. Today, the Ming are famous for building the Forbidden City palace in Beijing, and for their beautiful pottery.

# MING



1288773

English



WELCOME TO

# THE GREAT WALL of China

## IMPORTANT STATS

- The wall was intended to protect China from northern invaders, such as Mongols, Manchus, and the SQ.
- The wall was started in 221 BC by Emperor Qin Shi Huang, but has been added to many times over the years. The Ming Dynasty built much of the stone wall that exists today.
- When the wall was built, there were no trucks or bulldozers—the whole thing was built by hand!
- Some sections of the wall are built from stone, some from brick, and others are made of piled earth.
- \* The Great Wall of China is around 5,500 miles long!
- It contains 25,000 watchtowers! Watchtowers were usually built close enough that archers in neighboring towers could hit an enemy anywhere between them.
- Is the wall visible from space? Not really. The wall is made from local materials, so it blends into the landscape.

ADMISSION



my rem + n + 

R  + coming

W +  - h.




C

the



B + , 2  + ies

b  - R + ing...

--Li Yuan,  
Hystorian





The Great Wall is sometimes said to look like a dragon from above. The end of the wall is even called Old Dragon Head—and looks like a dragon drinking from the sea.



Those first three are pretty easy right? The rest of them might take some more time....

### LEARN TO WRITE CHINESE NUMBERS

一 1 yī	二 2 èr	三 3 sān	四 4 sì	五 5 wǔ
六 6 liù	七 7 qī	八 8 bā	九 9 jiǔ	十 10 shí

神  
奇  
自  
貼  
膠  
口

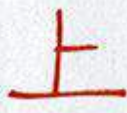


**FYI**

There's no Chinese alphabet. Instead, symbols called "characters" stand for each word. For example:



means middle



is above

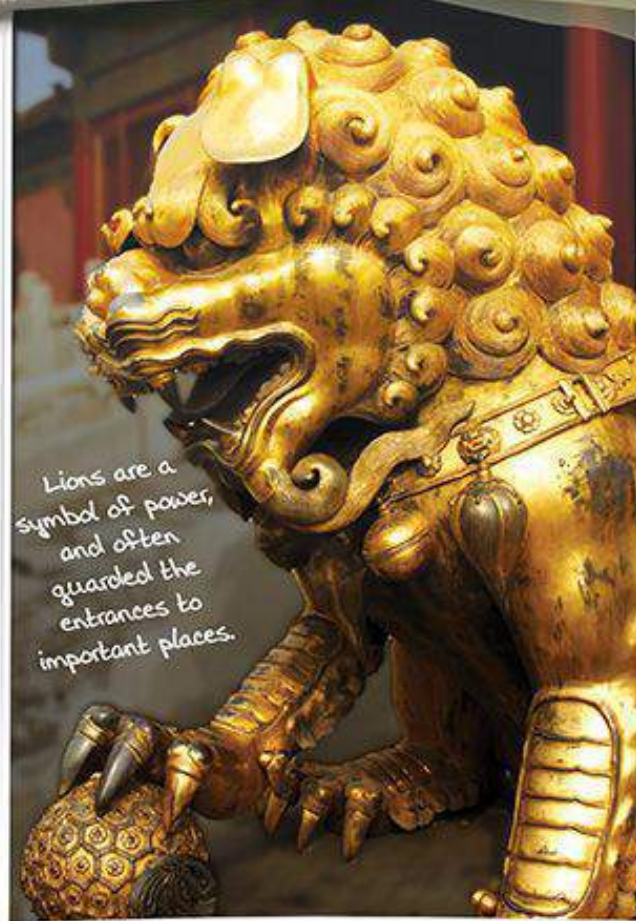


is below

(I'm sure you can see why)

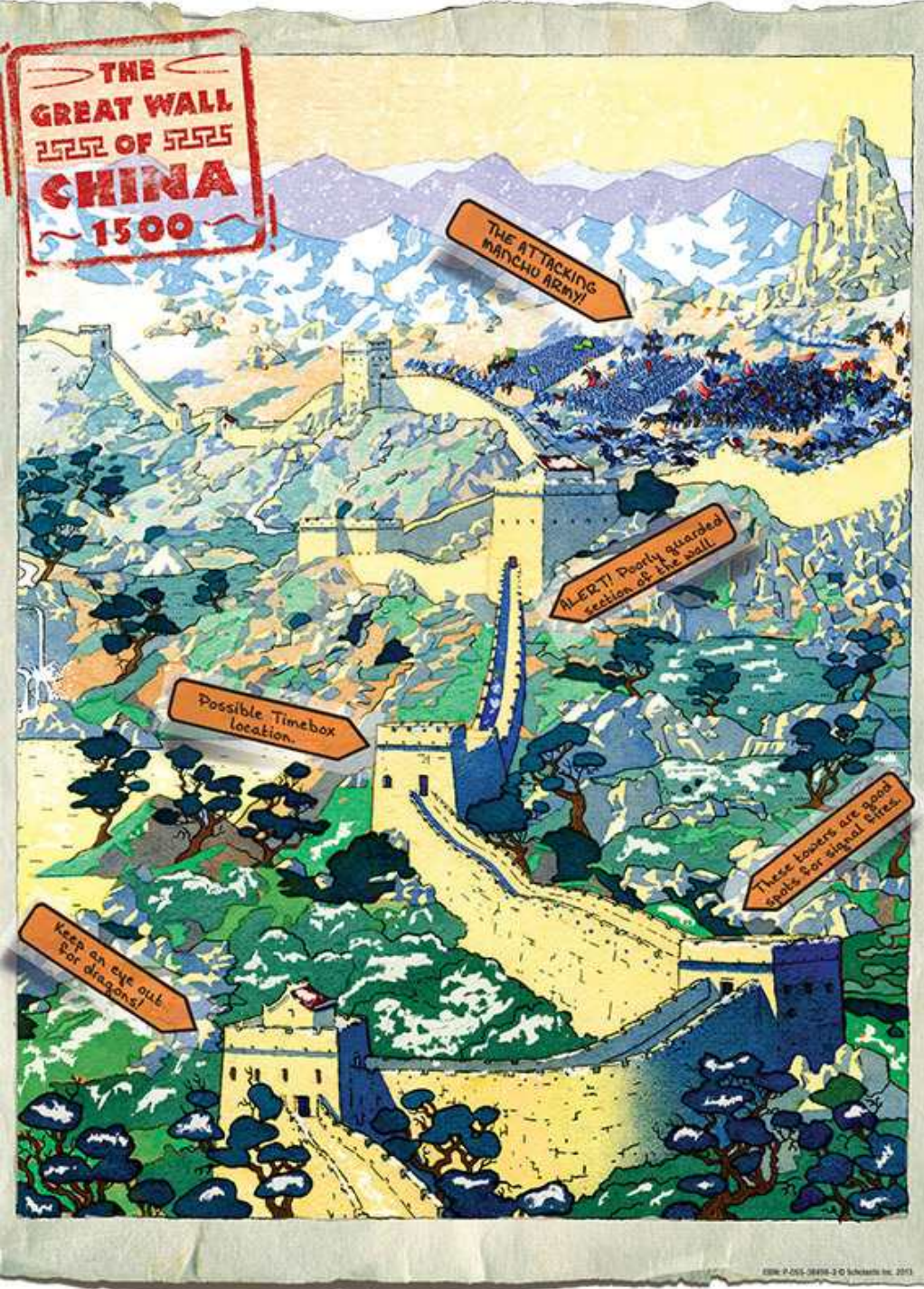
Wnigme lenfwt nag  
shward gonf pnowtgrery  
bygn thnc tomwier.  
Ynogum' ll nhamvic tnomi  
cgomlilenct namll thnc  
shargmids tgo hemlip usi!

Remove all the  
letters in MING from  
the coded note to  
reveal the true  
message.



Lions are a  
symbol of power,  
and often  
guarded the  
entrances to  
important places.





THE  
GREAT WALL  
OF CHINA  
1500

THE ATTACKING  
MANCHU ARMY!

ALERT! Poorly guarded  
section of the wall.

Possible Timebox  
location.

These towers are good  
spots for signal fires.

Keep an eye out  
for dragons!

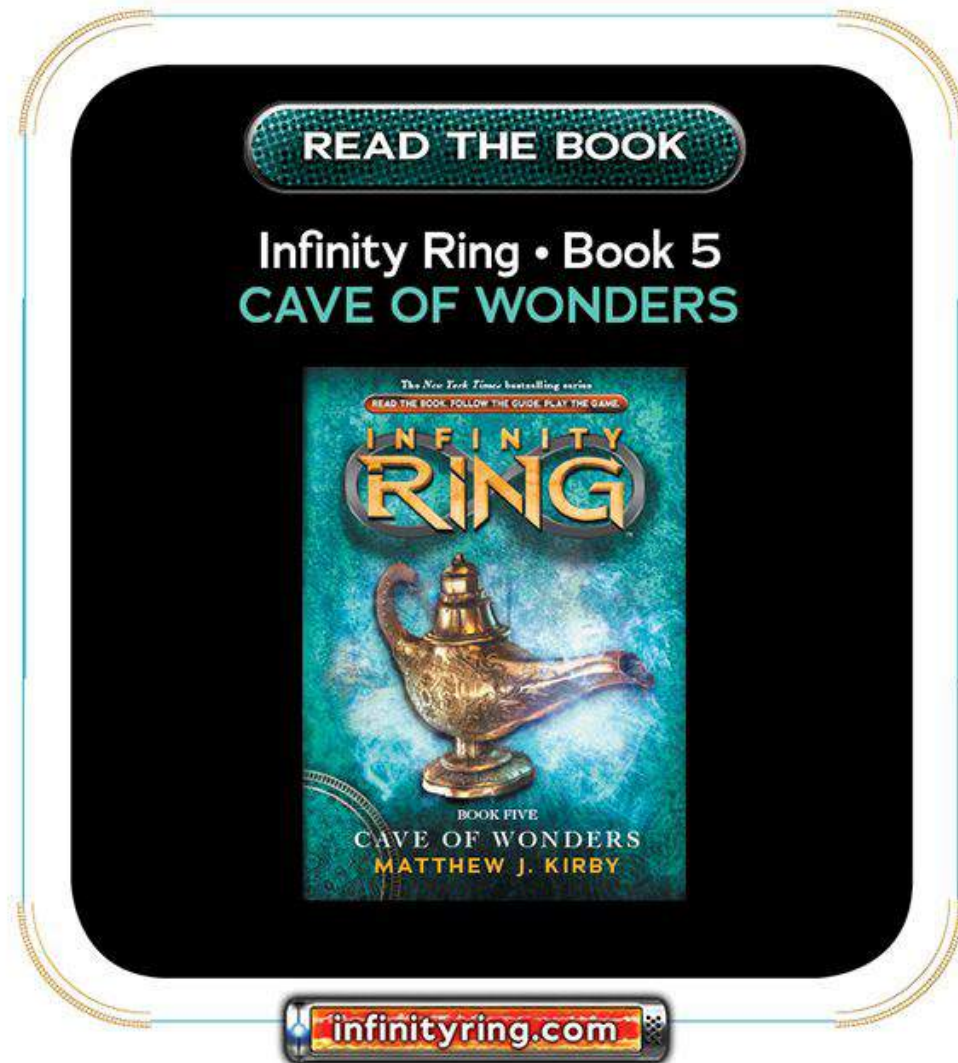


An SQ army is trying to break through the Great Wall of China! Play as Dak, Sera, and Riq as they race to keep the wall — and the country — from falling.

Log on now to save China from the invaders.

Fix the past. Save the future.

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The golden age of Baghdad is a time of magic and wonder. But it is coming to a quick and tragic end. Can Dak, Sera, and Riq fix the next Great Break before the kingdom falls?

Includes an all-new, top secret Hystorian's Guide — which unlocks the next episode of the Infinity Ring game.

Turn the page for a sneak peek!

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Below is a sneak peek from Infinity Ring Book 5: *Cave of Wonders* by Matthew J. Kirby.

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After that, the three of them kept their heads down and remained quiet. And when the caravan started moving, they moved with it, staying as hidden as they could. Dak risked a glance at the guards when they

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“It worked!” Dak whispered.

“Of course it worked,” Riq said, and then Dak regretted saying anything.

They passed under the shadow of the gate’s high arches, through the city wall, and into a busy street where a cacophony of sights and smells and sounds assaulted them. Buildings rose up several stories to either side, sprouting tents and canopies at their bases. Shopkeepers and street vendors shouted their wares.

“The sweetest dates you’ll ever taste!”

“Olives! Plump, rich olives!”

“Come! Run your hands over the finest silk between Samarkand and Damascus!”

“The brightest lapis and jasper your eyes have ever seen!”

The sharp smell of spices filled Dak’s nose, mixed with that of smoke and camel and other things he couldn’t place. It was overwhelming, and amazing. He felt like Aladdin, and could almost believe there was a lamp somewhere waiting for them with a genie in it.

“Wow,” Sera said. “Okay. Let’s find a quiet place to pull out the Square.”

“You!”

The three of them turned to see one of the guards marching toward them.

He pointed at them. “You three! Stop!”

“Uh-oh,” Dak said.

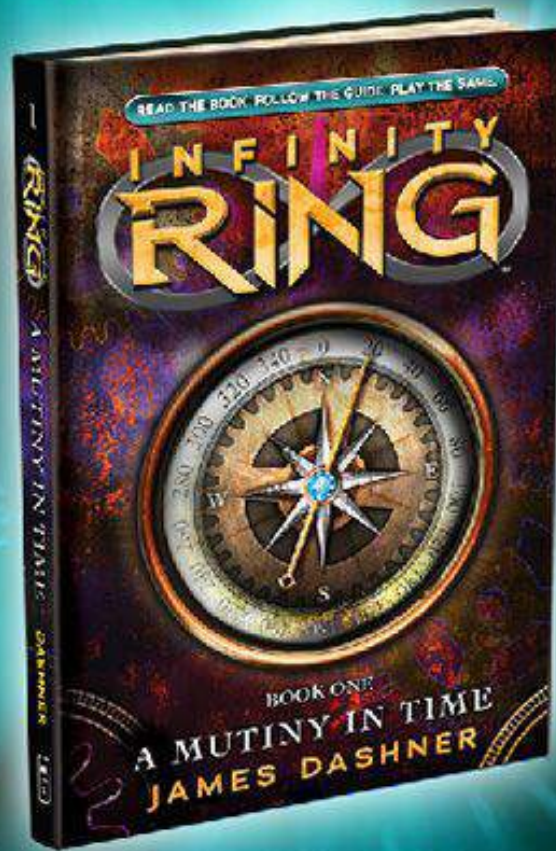




**Matt de la Peña** is the author of numerous books for teens, including *Ball Don't Lie*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, and *I Will Save You*, all of which were named ALA-YALSA Best Books for Young Adults. His first picture book, *A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis*, made several Best of 2011 lists. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, where he teaches creative writing. Learn more at his website, [www.mattdelapena.com](http://www.mattdelapena.com).

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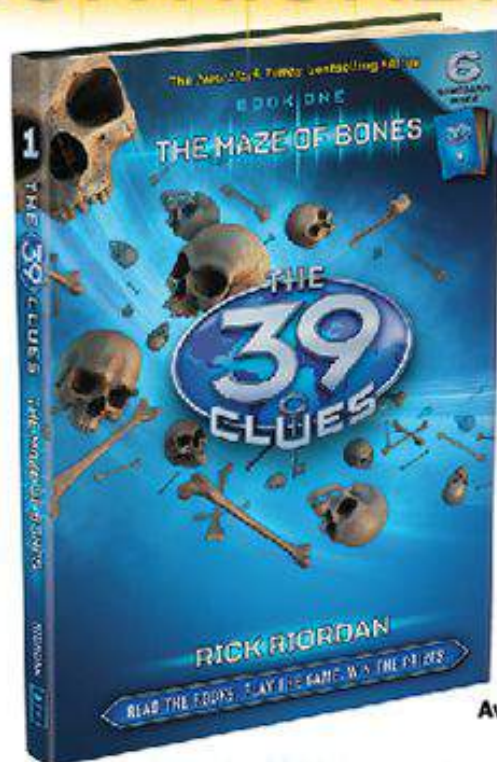
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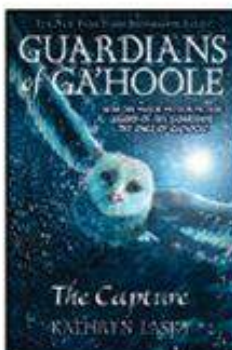
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

e-ISBN 978-0-545-48459-6

Cover illustration by Chris Nurse and Cheung Tai

Cover design by Keirsten Geise

Back cover photography of characters by Michael Frost © Scholastic Inc.

First edition, June 2013

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012

Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1

Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141

Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

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# INFINITY RING™



BOOK FIVE

CAVE OF WONDERS

MATTHEW J. KIRBY





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It all starts here in the books, where you'll discover a world in which history is broken . . . and meet the three young people who must risk their lives to set things right.

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Cave of Wonders

Matthew J. Kirby

SCHOLASTIC INC.

To all those who teach and study history, I thank you

— M.K.





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Have you seen in all the length and breadth of the earth

A city such as Baghdad?

— Umara ibn Aqil, ninth-century poet





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“It worked!” Dak whispered.

“Of course it worked,” Riq said, and then Dak regretted saying anything.

They passed under the shadow of the gate’s high arches, through the city wall, and into a busy street where a cacophony of sights and smells and sounds assaulted them. Buildings rose up several stories to either side, sprouting tents and canopies at their bases. Shopkeepers and street vendors shouted their wares.

“The sweetest dates you’ll ever taste!”

“Olives! Plump, rich olives!”

“Come! Run your hands over the finest silk between Samarkand and Damascus!”

“The brightest lapis and jasper your eyes have ever seen!”

The sharp smell of spices filled Dak’s nose, mixed with that of smoke and camel and other things he couldn’t place. It was overwhelming, and amazing. He felt like Aladdin, and could almost believe there was a lamp somewhere waiting for them with a genie in it.

“Wow,” Sera said. “Okay. Let’s find a quiet place to pull out the Square.”

“You!”

The three of them turned to see one of the guards marching toward them.

He pointed at them. “You three! Stop!”

“Uh-oh,” Dak said.



## The Riddle of the Cave

THE GUARD had one hand on the pommel of the sword he wore at his waist. “Did you pay the toll?”

“We were with the caravan that just passed through.” Riq tried to sound confident. His skill with languages meant he usually ended up being the spokesman. *And let’s face it*, he thought, looking at the other two, *that’s probably a good thing*. “The leader of our caravan paid the toll.”

The guard looked all three of them over, and took his time doing it. “They came from Medina. How is it you are wearing the clothing of China?”

“We spent time there before joining up with that caravan,” Riq said.

The guard didn’t seem to be buying it. He kept looking at their clothes. “You’re pretty young to be working caravans.”

For a moment, Riq worried that maybe the man was a Time Warden, an undercover SQ agent on the lookout for time travelers, and his heart began to pound. But he tried to hide it, and told himself to stop being paranoid. “We . . . uh, travel with our parents.”

The guard narrowed his eyes.

“Yeah,” Dak said. “They’re silk traders.”

“And they’ll be expecting us,” Sera said.



The guard released the pommel of his sword. “All right. Get moving, then.”

The three of them nodded and turned away. They walked down the street together, and Riq could feel the guard staring at them, his gaze a weight on the back of his neck.

“He’s watching us, isn’t he?” Sera asked.

Riq peered over his shoulder. “Yup. Just keep moving.”

“Do you think he was a Time Warden?” Dak asked.

Riq shook his head. “We can’t assume that everyone who looks at us funny is a Time Warden. We tend to get a lot of funny looks.”

Dak looked down at his Chinese clothing. “I guess maybe we need to find some clothes that will help us blend in better. The good news is that Baghdad at this time was a diverse place. I mean, it was on the Silk Road, after all.”

“The Silk Road?” Sera echoed.

“Duh, like I said before. The Silk Road was a trading route stretching from the Mediterranean all the way to China. Meaning Baghdad had people from all over the world coming through here. We don’t have to pretend to be locals, we just might want to look a little less . . . exotic.”

Sera glanced around. “I think we need to check out the SQuare before we do anything about clothes. We need to figure out the Break.”

“Oh, yeah.” Dak pointed at an alleyway nearby. “How about over there?”

Riq nodded. “Looks good.”

The three of them crossed the busy street and entered the alley. It was narrow, filled with deep shadows, and aside from a few baskets, it was empty. Dak pulled the SQuare out of his pants, and Riq expected Sera to say something about how gross that was. But she just took the device from Dak with a blank expression. Riq wondered what was going on with her. She wasn’t acting like herself. Maybe something was happening with her Remnants, those strange feelings and false memories

that came in waves and hinted that something . . . wasn't how it was supposed to be.

"Okay." She flipped on the SQuare and peered at the screen.

Riq waited for her to tell them what she saw there. It was usually some kind of Art of Memory puzzle or a coded message protecting what little information the Hystorians had managed to load onto the device.

"Listen to this." She read it out loud:

*"To find what Aristotle gave  
Speak the words, open the cave.  
Inside a treasure gleaming bright,  
The jewels of learning, history's light."*

The SQuare let out a little bleep, and an empty box popped up.

"Weird." Sera's eyebrows knitted together. "It looks like it wants a password for something."

"For what?" Dak asked.

Riq peered over Sera's shoulder. "Try *password*. That's what worked before."

"Wait, wait." Dak held his hand out over the screen. "Is this one threatening to blow up if we don't get it right?"

"No." Sera typed. "Okay, *password* didn't work. Any other ideas?"

Riq had no ideas. But the riddle had mentioned something about history. Which meant it was kind of Dak's thing. The kid was annoying, but every once in a while one of those endless, useless facts he pulled out actually helped. "See what Dak can do with it."

Dak nodded. "Let me see it."

Sera handed him the SQuare. He read over the riddle again, and within moments Riq could see him getting all excited. When he got talking about history, he kind of rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Okay. Aristotle," Dak said. "He was the one who founded the Hystorians back in 336 BC. His writings helped uncover the existence of the Great Breaks in history. That *could* be what the riddle means about

what Aristotle ‘gave.’ Or, it could also be referring to how Aristotle’s writings influenced the great minds of Europe during the Renaissance.”

Riq sighed. Sifting through all the facts for the useful one sometimes took a while. “That’s great, Dak. What else you got?”

“Well, it says ‘Speak the words, open the cave.’ We *are* in Baghdad. That line of the riddle might refer to the tale of Ali Baba, which, by the way, some believe was *not* one of the original tales from the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Same with *Aladdin*, which was originally set in China. But it would make sense with the ‘treasure gleaming bright.’ I’m not sure what that would make the ‘jewels of learning,’ though.” He tapped his chin. “I’m going to try something.”

“What?” Riq asked.

“*Open sesame.*”

Sera raised an eyebrow. “Actually, that sounds right, with the cave and all.”

Dak nodded and typed it in. The SQuare’s screen flashed. And then something else came up. “Guys?” Dak held the device out. “Check this out.”

Arin Cole appeared on the screen. She was one of Riq’s fellow Hystorians, the one who had tried to load all the information they would need about the Great Breaks onto the SQuare. It appeared to be a prerecorded video, created before the attack on the Hystorians’ headquarters. She looked stressed, as usual. *More* stressed than usual, in fact.

“He-hello,” she said. “Dak and Sera and the rest of our insertion team.”

The sight of her, thoughts of the old HQ, it all made Riq think about how he’d grown as a Hystorian. About what he’d given up for the mission.

*Kisa*. His first true friend, the girl he’d left behind during their mission in the time of the Maya. The girl who had become the first

Hystorian to her people. Riq missed her. When he thought of her, he felt the pain and longing of a different kind of Remnant, and he had to take a deep breath to drive it out and focus on the recording.

“If you are watching this,” Arin said, “you have reached the Great Break in Baghdad, in the year 1258.”

Riq, Sera, and Dak all looked at one another. That was true. They were in the right place. So far, so good.

“That’s the good news.” Arin sighed. “Now the bad news. In two days, Mongols under the leadership of Hulagu Khan, the grandson of Ghengis Khan, will sack Baghdad. The city will be decimated.”

Okay, that *was* bad news. Riq thought back to Paris when the Vikings had laid siege to it, and did not like the thought of going through that kind of thing again.

“During the destruction of the city, hundreds of thousands of books will be destroyed, including those in the House of Wisdom.”

“What’s the House of Wisdom?” Riq asked.

Dak perked up. “Oh! The House of Wis —”

“*Shh!*” Sera looked hard at both of them. “Do you mind?”

“The House of Wisdom contained a library,” Arin said, “with many of the writings of our founder, Aristotle. The Mongols emptied the library and threw all the books in the Tigris River. Among the books they destroyed was a volume of Aristotle’s research on the Great Breaks. Specifically, research pertaining to the very first Great Break — or, from your perspective, the *last* Great Break. The final one you will fix.”

Riq leaned closer. If the Hystorians didn’t have the volume about the last Great Break . . .

Sera shook her head. “But if the book was lost — ?”

“*Shh!*” Riq said.

“Without that book,” Arin said, “that first, crucial Great Break — the Prime Break — will be impossible to fix, and our entire mission will be lost. New Breaks will occur faster than you can fix them. The Earth will

be destroyed in the Cataclysm. We Hystorians knew this day would come, when our knowledge of the Prime Break would have to be saved.”

“Great,” Dak said. “No pressure or anything.”

“*Shh!*” Riq and Sera said at the same time.

“Your task,” Arin said, “is to save the library at the House of Wisdom, and with it the writings of Aristotle. It is the only way to save the world.”

Arin stepped aside, and then Brint and Mari walked into view on the recording. Riq hadn’t seen them since the SQ had attacked them all, before their first Break saving Christopher Columbus from a mutiny.

“We want to express our gratitude and admiration,” Brint said. “If you’ve made it this far, you’ve fixed eight of the Breaks. Only a handful more to go before the Prime Break.”

Eight done. Only a few left. As Riq thought about that, a dread seeped into him about what would happen to him when they finished. He knew he had messed with his family tree back in 1850. He didn’t even know if he technically existed anymore. . . .

It didn’t help that the people in the video, people he’d known all his life, weren’t addressing him by name. But he told himself that was just because he had joined Dak and Sera’s mission at the very last second.

Mari spoke next. “After you have fixed the Baghdad Break, and saved the information we need on the Prime Break, you will face the most dangerous part of your mission so far.”

More dangerous than a Mongol invasion? Riq froze, waiting for what Mari would say next. So, it seemed, did Sera and Dak.

“Your current SQuare has no information on the Prime Break,” Mari said, “because we didn’t have any information to load on it. If you fix the Baghdad Break in the past, we will have that information in the present. That means you will have to return to the present for a new SQuare at some point.”

Riq's whole body felt like he'd just walked outside into the snow in his pajamas. Every Hystorian knew that once you entered the time stream, it would be extremely dangerous to warp back to the present before all the Breaks were fixed. There was no telling what would happen. Paradoxes. Holes ripped in the fabric of reality. The end of the universe. But Riq had something else to be afraid of.

"We know it's a risk," Mari said.

*You have no idea.* If Riq went back to the future *now*, he might cease to exist.

"But it's one we have to take," Brint said. "There is no other choice. Hopefully, by this point, history will be repaired enough to cope with the potential paradoxes."

Riq swallowed. *What if it isn't?*

"Good luck," Mari said. "And one last thing. Arin?"

"There's *more*?" Dak threw up his hands. "Isn't that enough?!"

Mari and Brint stepped aside, and Arin came back on the screen, clutching an armful of papers.

"Yes." She adjusted her glasses. "I'm sorry. I've done countless hours of research. Really, you have no idea. I mean, if you could see the mountain of parchment I —"

"Arin." That was Mari's voice off to the side. "It might help if you could get to the point."

"Right." Arin cleared her throat. "Unfortunately, we have no idea who the Hystorian in Baghdad was. You're on your own."



## The Streets of Baghdad

THE SCREEN went black. Sera stared at it. Really the message from Arin could not have been any worse. Of all of them, Sera was the only one who had *seen* the Cataclysm. She'd witnessed firsthand what would happen to the world if they failed in their mission to repair the Breaks. She also knew that somehow, she had parents now, in the future, a mother and father who had only been Remnants before Sera, Dak, and Riq had begun their mission. Before they'd changed the past. Parents who would die in the flooding, ripped away from Sera just as she'd become aware of them.

But if she had to go back to the future for a new SQuare, would they be there? Would she be able to meet them?

"So, let's get to it," Dak said. "We have a Hystorian to find. I bet he'll be at the House of Wisdom with Aristotle's books, don't you think?"

How could Dak just move on like that? Didn't he realize what was happening? Sera's irritation got the better of her. "How do you know it's a *he* and not a *she*, Dak? Huh? Why do you assume that?"

Dak shrugged, his eyes downward. "I don't know. Geez, what's the matter with you? What's the matter with both of you?"

"Nothing," Sera and Riq said at the same time.

Sera looked at Riq. He was frowning, his forehead creased in worry. When he looked back at her, Sera saw that Arin's message had obviously disturbed him, too. Maybe it had something to do with his Remnants. She knew he had them like she did. They'd talked about them before.

"Fine," Dak said. "Don't tell me."

"Oh, for the love of mincemeat," Sera said. "Quit pouting, all right?" Maybe it would be best to just get moving and not think about all that other stuff. Put the Cataclysm out of her mind and concentrate on the mission. The Break. The really, really important Break on which everything depended. Sera sighed. "The House of Wisdom seems like a good place to start. Don't you think so, Riq?"

"Yeah." Riq's voice was quiet. "Sounds good."

"Well —" Dak looked back and forth between them. "Okay, then."

Sera took the Square and tucked it away. They left the alley, returning to the main street with its seemingly endless stream of pedestrians and camels. She had to admit, it was pretty exciting to be here, and not too different from what she'd imagined it would be like. Except for the noise, which was louder than she would have expected.

"Okay," Riq said. "Directions." He stopped someone walking past and asked him about the House of Wisdom. The man gestured and pointed, his hand going one way, then the other. Sera couldn't really hear him, so she hoped Riq got it all.

Riq thanked the man, and then said, "Let's go. It's on the other side of the city. We'll try to find some clothes on the way."

*Clothes.* Sera looked around, trying to figure out what girls and women wore here, but quickly saw there were a lot more men on the street than women. The men all seemed to be wearing about the same thing. Layers of fabric of different patterns and colors, robes with wide sleeves and wide belts, and most of them wore some kind of wrapping or turban around their head. Things would be easy for Dak and Riq. But it looked like it would be harder for Sera. The women wore a wider variety



of styles. Some wore plain dresses, or dresses that were brocaded or embroidered, and some wore flowing silks in vivid colors. Some dressed in black with veils that covered their hair and their faces. Still others wore scarves and beaded headdresses.

“What am I supposed to wear?” she asked out loud.

“Take your pick,” Dak said. “You should be happy. Lots of cultures and religions mean lots of choices for once!”

“Come on,” Riq said. He set off down the busy road.

Dak shrugged at Sera, and they followed after him.

The road ran a straight course ahead of them, but off to either side, it seemed to Sera the city stretched away in a maze of narrow, twisting streets. The buildings climbed up high, some with balconies surrounded with wooden screens, and canopies that reached out above them.

“It’s so loud.” Sera almost felt like she had to shout over the camels, the donkeys, and the shop owners.

“I know, isn’t it great?!” Dak grinned.

They soon came to an enormous archway spanning the road. It almost looked like an older version of the city gate they had just come through, except it was standing by itself in the street, without any walls connected to it. They walked under it, and entered an open square in front of a building that was much larger than the rest. It stood apart, decorated with paint and iridescent tiles.

Sera turned to Dak. “What do you think that is?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“It’s a college,” Riq said, scowling.

“Good call! Baghdad had — has — a lot of colleges,” Dak said.

“And a lot of libraries. In fact, there was this one rich guy whose *personal* library took four hundred camels to move. Even I think that’s a lot of books for one dude.”

“But we need to find a specific library,” Sera said. “And a specific book.”

Riq shook his head. "Let's keep moving."

Sera grunted. She didn't know what was going on with Riq, and she was trying to be patient, but she was kind of getting annoyed.

Not much farther, the road turned sharply to the left, a canal running alongside it, sometimes visible, sometimes underground. Sera couldn't even see the end of the street off in the distance. This city was huge. They walked ahead for what would have been three or four blocks back home, and before long, all the sights and smells and sounds started to overwhelm her. How were they going to find a single Hystorian in all of this?

"I think I see another one of those gates." Dak pointed down the street.

Sera squinted. "I think you're right."

"They must be pretty old," Dak said. "From when the city was smaller, with a whole different wall around it or something. And now all that's left are these gates."

As they got closer to this one, a metallic clanging pierced the air. It sounded like a large group of people was banging a whole bunch of pots and pans together. The three of them looked at one another.

Then Riq leaned toward a passerby. "Excuse me, but what is that up ahead?"

The man looked back over his shoulder. "The Archway of the Armorers, of course."

*Armor.* If blacksmiths were making armor up there, that explained the sound. It also made Sera wish she had some earplugs, because the noise only got louder the closer they got.

This archway was in better condition than the last one had been. Decorations covered much of it, swirling patterns pressed into the clay bricks, with more of the iridescent tiles. Up close, they swirled with golds, greens, and browns. The archway still had its gate, too, but it was open, and they walked through it.

“Cool!” Dak said. “Look at that!”

Blacksmiths stood at forges and workbenches near one side of the square, shaping sheets of metal into what looked to Sera like helmets, and bending metal wire into rings, which they linked together into shirts of chain mail.

The people around here mostly seemed like soldiers, or guards, and as Sera passed by them, she overheard snippets of conversation.

“Hulagu and his Mongol horde are only a few days from the city.”

“What about the caliph’s cavalry?”

“Defeated. Wiped out.”

“All of them?”

“All twenty thousand.”

Sera’s eyes widened. She knew a little bit about the Mongols. She knew they rode horses, and that the Great Wall of China, where the three of them had just been fixing another Great Break, was built to keep the Mongols out. But to think of them wiping out twenty thousand soldiers, and now approaching the city, dropped a chunk of ice in her stomach.

“Did you hear that?” she asked Dak and Riq. “We don’t have much time.”

“I’ve been looking for an opportunity to score some clothes,” Riq said. “I haven’t seen anything.”

“I might have an idea,” Dak said. “But I need a quiet spot.”

*Quiet?* What was Dak thinking of doing? Sera never knew with him, and usually, that was exciting and fun. It was part of why they were friends. She liked seeing what crazy ideas he came up with, but that was back home. Here in Baghdad, when the fate of the world was at stake, they didn’t need one of Dak’s turned-out-to-not-be-such-a-good-idea ideas.

The crowded road past the Archway of the Armorers continued as far as the eye could see. They pressed their way down it, the equivalent of another three or four blocks, until they came to the biggest gate they had

seen so far. It was a couple of stories tall, covered in more of the decorations and shimmering tiles. It arched over the opening to a large square, while the road continued on to the left.

“We go through the arch,” Riq said. “According to that guy’s directions.”

So they passed under its shadow, and the square opened up a wide patch of blue sky above. Sera felt like she could breathe again. She inhaled, and smelled new fragrances on the breeze: herbs, flowers, and perfumes. At the far side of the square stood a beautiful mosque. Sera recognized it as a mosque because of the minaret, the tall tower beside it.

“That’s the mosque of the caliph,” Riq said.

“Who’s the caliph?” Sera asked.

“He was a religious leader of Islam,” Dak said.

The mosque had a high wall around it, decorated in bright blue hues that glinted like a lake in the sun. Onion-shaped domes crowned the wall’s four corners.

“He was also the ruler of Baghdad.” Dak pointed across the square. “And I bet that’s his palace.”

Beyond the mosque, another city wall surrounded the edge of the square, and beyond that, Sera saw an even larger building. It was decorated with reds, blues, and purples, its many domes and towers forming an imposing skyline over the city.

“That wall surrounds a couple of palaces like that one,” Riq said. “And a college, and the House of Wisdom.”

“So, how do we get inside?” Dak asked.

“The Gate of the Willow Tree,” Riq said. “The directions said it’s that way.” He pointed down a street in the far corner of the square.

They set off toward it. Sera was grateful for the open space, and the ability to walk without having to dodge oncoming camels. It was a bit warmer out in the sun, and the pleasant smell she’d noticed earlier just

got stronger. When they reached the street Riq had pointed at, she realized why.

It was a whole market of perfume makers. The fragrances of basil and other herbs hung in the air, the scent of spices and oils and aromas Sera couldn't identify. Sweet smells, sharp smells, and pungent, musky smells. There were more women here, too, outside the perfume shops.

"We just go through here," Riq said, "and then . . . Where's Dak?"

Sera spun around. He had just been right there beside her, and now he was gone. She scanned the market and spotted him over by a lemon and orange vendor.

"There he is," she said. "What's he doing?"

Dak climbed up onto a tall basket and held out his hands. "Come!" he shouted. "Listen to me!"

"Oh, no," Sera whispered. This must have been his idea, the one he needed quiet for, and she could already tell it was going to be a bad one.



## The Market Inspector

DAK NOTICED immediately that Sera and Riq were staring at him. Sera, especially, looked worried. Maybe he should have told them what he was about to do before he did it. But they never seemed to like Dak's ideas, even though sometimes, his ideas worked out really, really well. Other times . . .

“Come, come!” As he shouted from his basket, a curious crowd gathered around him.

Dak knew they needed clothes, and to get some, they needed money, because so far, he hadn't seen any clothes just lying around waiting for them to come along. He'd been going over what he knew about Baghdad, trying to figure out what they could do to earn some cash, when an idea came to him.

He remembered that there were storytellers who performed on the streets. They hadn't seen one yet, but Dak didn't see why *he* couldn't try to tell a story. If people liked it and they tossed him a few coins, maybe they'd be able to buy some clothes.

But now that he was up there, with a bunch of people looking at him, waiting, he wondered if he'd made a mistake.

“Uh . . . Now I will tell you a story!” He waved his hand in an arc in front of him. He didn't know why. It just seemed like a storyteller thing to do. “Once . . . upon a time!”

Sera slapped her forehead. Riq folded his arms across his chest.

“There was a djinn.” Dak congratulated himself for using the real word for genie. “And this djinn . . .” What? What should his story be about? Dak realized he probably should have figured that out before he got up here, but it was too late to back down now. So he grabbed the first thing that came into his mind. “This djinn had a ring that had magical powers. It allowed the djinn to travel backward in time!”

Sera was shaking her head now. Riq’s mouth hung open. What was their problem?

“One day,” Dak said, “the djinn met . . . a man. In the desert. And the man was wandering around, lost and depressed. And the djinn goes, ‘Why are you wandering around lost and depressed?’ And the man, uh, the man goes, ‘Oh, I’m sad because my house burned down, and the fire destroyed . . . a book my parents gave to me. It was my prized possession.’”

Dak thought he was doing a pretty good job. The audience seemed to be interested. None of them had walked away yet. So he kept going.

“When the djinn heard this, he said, ‘I can grant you your heart’s desire. What is it?’ And the man was like, ‘Really? My heart’s desire is to have my book back.’ So the djinn used his magical ring and took them both back in time to the man’s house *before* the fire.”

*Hey, this story is actually pretty good!* But Dak noticed a man standing at the back of the audience who did not look so happy. He wore a gray robe over a striped one, with a bright red turban wrapped around his head. Two fairly big guys — city guards by the look of them — stood on either side of him, and all three of them were glaring at Dak.

He kept going. “And they snuck into the man’s house, and the man from the future wanted to warn the man from the past about the fire, but the djinn was all, ‘No. You said your heart’s desire was your book.’” Dak felt his voice getting louder, and the words came faster. “So they went to the man’s library, and they found the book his parents had given to him,

and they took it, and the djinn used his ring to take them both back to the future where they came from. And the man had saved the book, his one true desire. The end.”

Dak bowed low.

No one clapped. He looked up. A moment later, he heard the light clink of a metal coin hitting the ground in front of him. Then another and another. The audience broke up, going back to whatever it was they’d stopped doing to listen to him.

Dak hopped down from his basket, feeling proud, and collected the money he’d earned. He didn’t recognize the coins, and he didn’t know how much was there, but he didn’t care right then. As he picked up the last, Sera and Riq rushed up to him.

“What were you thinking?” Sera was talking in that hissing voice she used when she was mad at him but couldn’t yell because there were teachers around.

“What do you mean?” He held out his handful of coins. “Look!”

“That’s great,” Riq said. “But what about that thing you just did where you told the whole city about the Infinity Ring, and why we’re here?”

“I didn’t do that,” Dak said.

Sera lifted an eyebrow at him. “Magical ring that goes backward in time? Saving a book from a fire?”

Dak looked at the coins in his hand. “I *did* do that, didn’t I?” How could he have not realized he was basically turning their mission into a story? “Oops. What do we do now?”

“Hope there wasn’t a Time Warden in the audience,” Sera said.

“Uh-oh.” Dak remembered that guy with the red turban, and started looking around for him.

“‘Uh-oh’ what?” Riq asked.

Dak spotted him. He and his two guards were stalking toward them, and they looked even less happy than they had before. “‘Uh-oh’ him.”



“You! Storyteller!” The man in the red turban pointed at Dak. “Hold it right there.”

“What seems to be the trouble?” Riq asked.

“The trouble,” the man said, “is that I don’t remember issuing a permit for this young man to tell stories on the street.” He had a long, pointed beard and very deep-set eyes.

“You need a permit to tell a story?” Dak asked. “Really?”

“I am the Market Inspector!” The man’s glare trampled over all three of them. “And I decide what you need a permit for, and, yes, you need a permit to be a public entertainer. Do you have a permit?”

Dak gave a little shrug. “Well, no.”

The Market Inspector put his hands on his hips. “Then you must forfeit your illicit gain. Turn over the money.”

Dak didn’t want to. He had earned it. He had found a way to maybe buy some clothes. “Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t know. Can’t you just let it go this one time?”

The man’s eyes got sharp and narrow. “I *never* let things go.”

Dak looked at Sera and Riq. They looked back at him. He flicked his eyes in the direction Riq had pointed before. They nodded.

“Well, sir, I’m sorry,” Dak said. “If I’d known I needed a permit, I would have — RUN!” Dak launched into a sprint across the square, Sera and Riq close behind him.

“Seize them!” the Market Inspector shouted.

Dak looked back and saw the two city guards barreling after them as they left the Perfume Market and dove into the city.

The streets got narrower. They twisted and turned like a maze, climbing up and down steps, and they were as crowded as ever with camels and donkeys. People shouted at the three time travelers as they ran past, bumping into things. Dak accidentally knocked over a cart full of bread.

“Sorry!” he shouted over his shoulder.

Riq ran up alongside Dak. “Let me lead the way!”

He turned them down one street, then another. Dak soon lost all sense of direction, and he hoped Riq knew where he was going. But no matter how many turns they made or how far they ran, they just couldn't seem to dodge the Market Inspector and the guards, who stayed right behind them.

“Apparently,” Sera shouted, “he really *doesn't* let anything go!”

“Keep running!” Riq shouted.

Eventually, they burst onto a busier, wider street. There were even more people and animals here. More stalls and carts and shops. There was an old guy sitting on the ground nearby selling rugs, which he had laid out in stacks in front of his shop.

“I have an idea!” Sera looked back, and then led them to the rugs. She dropped to the ground, grabbed the edge of one of the rugs, and rolled herself up in it. Dak grinned and did the same thing.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Riq said, but soon he was rolled up in a rug, too.

The three of them lay there, side by side like burritos, while the rug seller just stared in surprise. Dak wiggled a hand free and flicked him one of the coins he'd just earned, then put his finger in front of his lips to say, “Shh.”

The old guy caught the coin, looked at it, and then glanced up as the Market Inspector charged out into the street. The rug seller winked at Dak, and looked away. Dak smiled, then ducked back inside his rug and tried to hold completely still.

Several moments passed. The sounds of the street carried on around them. Dak realized he was holding his breath, and at the same time realized he couldn't hold it forever. How long would they have to lie there?

“You, Rug Merchant!” That was the Market Inspector's voice. “We are looking for two children, one a Frank and the other a Persian like

you, and an older youth with them, an African. Have you seen them?”

“Yes, *muhtasib*, I have seen them,” the rug seller said.

Dak went cold inside.

“Well? Where are they?” the Market Inspector asked.

“They ran that way,” the rug seller said. “Toward the Gate of the Sultan.”

Dak closed his eyes in relief. Then he heard the sound of several feet beating the road away from them, eventually growing distant and quiet until he couldn't hear them anymore.

“You can come out now, little *pirashki*.”

Dak jerked sideways as the old guy lifted the edge of the rug and rolled him out into the street. He got up and dusted himself off as the rug seller did the same with Sera and Riq.

“Now that's what I call a magic carpet,” he said.

Riq turned to the merchant. “Thanks for not telling him where we were,” he said.

“Bah.” The rug seller gave Dak back his coin. “The Market Inspector is a powerful and unpopular man. It pleases me to find ways to frustrate him.”

“Thank you,” Dak said. “What's your name?”

“Farid,” he said. “And you are?”

“I'm Dak. This is Sera and Riq.”

“I am happy to meet you,” he said. “And now, I do not want to seem rude, but the Market Inspector will realize you have slipped out of his grasp and return this way soon.”

“Thanks,” Riq said. “We'll get going. Could you tell us the way to the House of Wisdom?”

“Oh, the House of Wisdom is it?” Farid chuckled. “Are you scholars in addition to being rug testers?”

“Yes,” Sera said. “I guess we kind of are.”

Farid gave them directions, and they said good-bye to him. They weren't as far off track as Dak had worried they would be after their escape from the Market Inspector. Before long, they were standing before the Gate of the Willow Tree, the great palace they had seen before much closer now. They had circled around it.

Riq pointed through the gate. "The House of Wisdom is on the other side."

They'd made it.



## The House of Wisdom

RIQ STILL couldn't believe how careless Dak had been. What if there had been a Time Warden in the audience? That could have been the end of the entire mission. As it was, Riq was still worried about the Market Inspector. He had seemed a little too determined to catch them.

Through the gate, they were able to see more of the palace. It was incredible, like something out of those old postcards Riq's Grandma Phoebe had kept from all her travels. Now that they were on this side of the wall, Riq could see there were actually several grand palaces and buildings. Gardens grew between them, lush with different trees and palms, and all kinds of colored flowers, bushes, and plants, while fountains spouted and bubbled in their midst.

Riq pointed to the right. "The first guy I talked to said the House of Wisdom is one of those buildings overlooking the river."

"There's a river running through the city?" Sera asked.

"That would be the Tigris River," Dak said. "Along with the Euphrates River, it forms a part of what's known as the Fertile Crescent region."

Riq rolled his eyes, but he was too tired to even make fun of Dak's history vomit right now.

So Dak kept going. "The region was also known as the 'cradle of civilization,' because it's where some of the first civilizations in the

world started. Like the ancient Sumerians. Did you know they had the first system of writing in the world? It's called cuneiform."

"That's great, Dak," Sera said.

"It is, isn't it?" From the sound of it, Dak hadn't picked up on Sera's sarcasm.

"We're almost there. Let's just go. We can worry about new clothes later." Riq hadn't said anything to the other two, but he almost didn't want to get to this House of Wisdom place. Every step he took toward it felt like a step toward a future where he didn't exist anymore. The only thing keeping him moving was his dedication to the mission. It was his way of honoring the memory of Kisa.

They passed in front of a two-story building with a series of striped, pointed arches in the walls. Riq remembered that was another college from the first guy's directions. Beyond the college, they could finally see the Tigris River flowing. It was as wide as maybe four soccer fields. Sailboats and rowboats moved across its surface like bugs. Bustling wharves and piers covered the shoreline, and across the water, Riq could see the western half of Baghdad. The river flowed right through the city, on its way to wherever it went, and it made Riq think about their mission. Fixing the Great Breaks, like removing boulders from the river of time.

"It's big," Sera said.

"This is called the Wharf of the Needle-Makers," Riq said. "And the next building should be the one we're looking for."

Up ahead, past a small courtyard, they saw a large, plain building. Its walls looked sturdy and well kept, but lacked the opulent decorations of the palaces and colleges. It had no windows, and a single large door standing open. Several men milled about in front of the entrance, most of them wearing white turbans.

To the side of the door, Riq saw a single engraving. It read:

# بيت الحكمة

“The House of Wisdom,” he said, pleased that he’d taken the time to learn how to read and write Arabic. “This is definitely it.”

“Okay,” Sera said. “So how do we do this?”

“What do you mean?” Dak asked. “We just walk in.”

“Oh, for the love of mincemeat,” Sera said. “First you go and blab our mission in front of the whole Perfume Market, and now you’re going to just walk in and . . . what? Ask which one of them is a Hystorian? Do you realize there could just as easily be SQ Time Wardens in there?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Dak said.

“I know,” Sera said.

“But I would have figured it out,” Dak said.

“But not before it was too late,” Sera said.

Riq raised his voice to interrupt them. “If we can get in there, the Hystorian may come to us. They’re on the lookout for us, remember?”

“But so are Time Wardens,” Sera said.

But that didn’t make sense to Riq when he thought about it. “Maybe not. Look, the Time Wardens know Aristotle founded the Hystorians, right? I’m betting if there were a Time Warden in the House of Wisdom, they would have destroyed Aristotle’s books a long time ago. There wouldn’t be anything in there for us to save from the Mongols in the first place.”

Dak turned to Sera. “I guess *you* didn’t think of *that*!”

“Neither did you!”

“Let’s just go in and see what happens,” Riq said.

They approached the front door, attracting looks from the men standing around outside it. Riq tried to hold his head up in a way that said the three of them belonged there, and they knew exactly where they

were going. But they hadn't reached the door before one of the men called to them.

"Can we help you?" he asked.

"We're here to see the House of Wisdom," Riq said, turning back to face him.

The man nodded up at the building. "Then your purpose has been fulfilled."

Great. This guy was super literal. He was probably a linguist. The annoying kind. "What I meant," Riq said, "is that we have come to visit the scholars within the House of Wisdom."

The man left his group and came over to them. "Is that so?"

Dak piped up. "It is."

"And what is it you seek from us?" the man asked.

"Uh . . ." Dak stuck out his handful of coins. "We've come to make a donation."

The man wrinkled his nose at the money like it smelled funky. "A donation?"

And now Dak had gone and offended him. The kid was on a roll.

"Sure," Dak said. "You guys take donations, right? Don't libraries always need money?"

The man's nostrils flared. "The House of Wisdom does not beg for money."

Now Sera spoke. "But do you take it when someone offers it?"

The man looked back at Dak's hand. "If you wish to contribute to the learning that goes on here, I'm certain such a donation would come back to reward *you* tenfold."

Riq's tension eased. The guy may have been too proud to admit the House of Wisdom needed the money, but he wasn't turning them away.

"For our donation," Riq said, "could we maybe go inside?"

The man looked each of them up and down. "I suppose that would not hurt anything. Follow me."



Riq sighed in relief, and so did Sera.

Dak just grinned. "Open sesame," he whispered.

They followed the man to the door and he ushered them through.

Inside, the building had a huge courtyard in the center, lined with columns and arches, and surrounded by two stories of doors and corridors. Dozens of people moved around, crossing the courtyard, going in and out of doorways, carrying stacks of paper and scrolls and books.

"And now you have been inside," the man said.

"Could we look around a bit?" Dak asked.

The man sucked air through his teeth. "Let me find Abi."

"Who?" Riq asked.

"Ibn Abī al-Shukr. He volunteers to show newcomers around. He enjoys it, for some reason. Wait here."

He walked away, leaving the three of them alone.

"This is amazing," Dak said. "There are probably books in here the people of our time have never seen or even heard of. Think of the history!"

"I'm more interested in the books on math and science," Sera said.

"The only book we're here for is the one that will prevent the Cataclysm," Riq said, even though as he said it, his stomach tightened up.

"Right," Dak said. "But if we happen to see another cool book along the way, there's no harm in looking."

Riq shook his head. "Dak, I —"

"Here they are, Abi." The man who had let them in had returned with another man by his side. The new guy was younger, maybe in his late twenties or early thirties. He wore a pale blue robe and a white turban. A thick beard covered his very round face, and his smile seemed wide enough to touch his ears.

"Welcome!" he said.

The other man nodded and left them, back through the front door.

Abi lifted his eyebrows. “I’m told you wish to make a donation and see the House of Wisdom?”

“That’s right!” Dak held out his handful of coins.

The man took them with both hands and a slight bow of his head. “I do feel some discomfort taking money from a young man like yourself, but I believe you are sincere, and we thank you for your generosity. I am Ibn Abī al-Shukr, but you may call me Abi.”

“I’m Dak. This is Sera and Riq.”

“Is that so?” The tone of the man’s voice became serious. “Unusual names.”

“Yes, well” — Sera put on that innocent smile that Riq had seen her use before — “we’re not from here.”

“I perceive that,” the man said. “I believe you have traveled far. Very far indeed.”

Riq thought he seemed suspicious. Was he simply talking about their clothes from China? Or did he mean something else? The first guy had said Abi liked to show newcomers around the place, and now Riq wondered why that was. Could it be because Abi was the Hystorian? Maybe being the designated tour guide let him check to see if any strangers coming to the House of Wisdom were from the future.

Riq decided to test that theory. “We come from farther away than you would probably think. He said you like to show new people around?”

“I do,” Abi said. “I . . . have an interest in where people come from, and how and why they find their way here to the House of Wisdom.”

“I bet you hear all kinds of stories,” Riq said.

“I do.” Abi smiled. “But so far, nothing that would seem *impossible* to believe. No one has yet flown here, for example. Or come by other means unknown to the people of my time.”

*Time.* That settled it in Riq’s mind. This guy had to be either a Hystorian or a Time Warden, and since he still doubted they’d find any Time Wardens here in the House of Wisdom, the moment had come for

them to stick their necks out once again. He looked at Sera and Dak, and gave a little shrug. He was going for it.

“We came here by something you might think is impossible,” he said.

“Oh?” Abi asked.

“Yeah, you could say our . . . boat travels *backward* up the river.”

Abi cocked his head. “I see. Come, let me show you more of the House of Wisdom.”

He gestured for them to follow him, and they proceeded down one of the arched walkways around the courtyard. From there, they took one of the corridors deeper into the building, the scuff of their steps echoing back at them. They passed several spacious rooms, each lined with bookshelves set in arched alcoves with borders of intricate paint and tile around them. Scholars were at work within each of the rooms, reading and writing and speaking in hushed tones.

Riq thought back to the courtyard. If all the corridors were like this, with big rooms full of books, then there were thousands and thousands of volumes here.

Eventually, they came to what Riq assumed was some kind of sitting area. Except there weren't any chairs. Persian rugs covered the floor, and cushions and pillows surrounded a few low tables. It was otherwise empty.

“Please, sit down.” Abi gestured toward one of the tables.

Riq, Sera, and Dak all lowered themselves to the floor. It was actually comfortable. Really comfortable. More comfortable than any of the chairs at the Hystorian headquarters, that was for sure. Riq thought he might suggest to Brint and Mari that they start conducting all Hystorian meetings on cushions on the floor. But then he remembered his fears and that thought turned to dread.

“Good. Now we can talk.” Abi took a seat across the table from them. “As I'm sure you have guessed, I, like you, am a Hystorian.”

Riq didn't know whether that was cause for celebration or despair.



## Roses

SERA WAS finally able to relax a little. They had found Abi, in spite of Dak, but also because of Dak, and it was quiet here. The walls of the House of Wisdom kept the clamor and chaos of the city out, and Sera thought this was a place she could get some work done. Maybe solve the Riemann hypothesis, which seemed appropriate, since the Babylonians were the first to use the number zero, one of the few history facts that interested Sera.

“So you know why we’re here?” Riq asked Abi.

“Of course. You are here from the future to prevent a Great Break from occurring.”

“Exactly,” Riq said.

Abi leaned forward. “And do you know what this Break is? Does it have to do with Hulagu Khan and the Mongols, who are at our very doorstep?”

“Yes,” Dak said. “They’re going to sack Baghdad in two days. According to the history books, it’s going to be bad. And I mean *really* bad.”

“How bad?” Abi asked.

“Baghdad will basically be a ghost town for a few hundred years,” Dak said.

Abi sat back, exhaling sharply. “And what of the libraries?”

“The Mongols are going to destroy them,” Dak said. “Eyewitnesses said the Tigris River ran black with the ink of all the books they threw in the water.”

“No, no, no,” Abi whispered, eyes wide, shaking his head. “‘The scholar’s ink is more sacred than the blood of martyrs.’ So said the Prophet, peace be upon him.”

It looked to Sera like Abi felt an almost physical pain when he thought about books being destroyed. But Sera had learned among her ancestors just how powerful a single book could be. Books could save cultures, like the Maya. In the case of Aristotle, books could save the world.

“Do you have a plan for how to repair this Break?” Abi asked.

“No,” Riq said. “All we know is that we can’t let Aristotle’s writings be destroyed. Beyond that, we were hoping you might be able to give us some ideas.”

Abi took a deep breath. “I think it would be impossible to prevent the Mongols from attacking. They have swept through Persia already, and even conquered the fortress of Alamut, which no force has done in nearly two hundred years.”

“What about the caliph?” Riq asked. “Can’t he just talk to Hulagu? Maybe even surrender?”

“Hulagu will attempt to negotiate, but the caliph does not believe the city will fall. He will not see reason. That is why he waited until it was too late before he sent out his cavalry.”

Sera remembered what she’d heard at the Archway of the Armorers. “And they were all wiped out.” She shuddered. “Okay. So the Mongols are coming and we can’t stop them. Can we move the books?”

“No,” Abi said. “It would take a thousand camels, and even then, where would we move them to? I’ve heard the Mongol army is now on both sides of the river.” He made a fist. “They have the city in a vise.”

“What about just saving Aristotle’s book?” Dak asked. “That seems easier, and it’s all Brint and Mari needed for the Prime Break, right?”

“How would you save it?” Abi asked.

“I don’t know,” Dak said. “Just hide it somewhere.”

Abi scratched his beard. “And do you think you could find a place where it would be safe for several centuries? How will it be found when it is needed? Who will find it? What if the SQ get to it before then?”

Dak held up his hands. “Okay, okay. I get it.”

Sera had another idea. Maybe the safest place for the book was with them. “What if we take it with us?” she asked. “Just take it to Brint and Mari in the present.”

“And what happens to my time without it?” Abi asked. “How do you know if by taking it, you are not robbing the intervening centuries of needed knowledge? Books need libraries. Libraries are the vessels of the world’s accumulated wisdom.”

“So we have to save the library,” Riq said. “We may not be able to stop Hulagu from attacking the city. But could we stop him from destroying the libraries?”

“What?” Dak said. “Like, just ask him? ‘Hey, Hulagu, what’s goin’ on, dude? Hey listen, I know you’re about to conquer Baghdad and all, but do you think you could leave that library alone? That’d be great. Thanks.’”

“Shut up,” Riq said.

“You shut up,” Dak said.

“I’m not the one suggesting dumb ideas,” Riq said.

“That sure sounded like one to me,” Dak said.

Abi looked back and forth between them like someone watching a tennis match played by monkeys.

“Oh, for the love of —” Just when Sera thought these two might be starting to get along, they turned back into bickering second graders, and

for the thirty-seventh time she wondered if immaturity was a side effect of time travel. “Both of you, grow up!”

They stopped.

Dak folded his arms, glowering.

Riq clenched his jaw for a few seconds, and then said, “I was just thinking that persuasion might be an option.”

“Dumb!” Dak said.

“Actually,” Abi said, “you might be close to something.”

“You think Hulagu might actually see reason?” Sera asked.

“I have someone else in mind,” Abi said. “When Hulagu conquered the Alamut fortress, he took an imprisoned scholar from there as his advisor. Nasir al-Din al-Tusi.”

Sera knew that name. Tusi was a famous astronomer and mathematician, and Sera had studied him. She admired him. The Tusi Couple was really important in Copernicus’s model of the solar system and the motions of the planets. And Tusi was with Hulagu Khan?

“The caliph has already refused to surrender,” Abi said, “but I have heard that Hulagu will send Tusi to the caliph to attempt to convince him. If we can persuade Tusi, then *he* might have enough influence with Hulagu to get him to spare the library.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Riq said. “Do you know when he’ll be here?”

Abi shook his head. “I think very soon. Let me reach out to my contacts in the palace. They will know more.”



A short while later, Abi brought them food. Really good food. There were dates, olives, cheese, and flatbread, with a couple of spicy dishes that reminded Sera of curry. They drank water flavored with the juice of melons. While eating around the low tables, they mostly used their fingers and the flatbread to scoop food into their mouths. Dak seemed to



really enjoy eating with his hands. And of course, he especially enjoyed the cheese.

“Mm,” he said. “It’s a goat cheese like feta or chevret, but saltier.”

Abi didn’t eat, but instead asked them questions about the future world they had come from. Sera was surprised at some of his reactions. He readily accepted some things she thought he might not believe them about, like cars.

“Automata are well known to us,” he said. “The Banū Mūsā brothers created many ingenious devices here in the House of Wisdom centuries ago.”

But when they talked about the other Great Breaks, Abi grew surprised, and even doubtful. He was especially amazed at their adventure with the Maya.

“Do you mean there is another *land* across the sea that we know nothing about?” he asked.

“Yes.” Sera sat up straight when she talked about her ancestors now. “The people there have a powerful empire with an amazing culture.”

“And you saved *their* writings, too?” Abi asked.

“Yeah,” Riq said. “This is actually the second book we’ve had to save.”

“Not just a book.” Abi looked around. “A library.”

Dak cleared his throat. “And now you guys see why history is important, right? Not just the facts of what happened, but how we *remember* what happened, too.”

Sera had to admit Dak had a point there. The SQ had proven there were a lot of ways they could mess with history. Sometimes, they didn’t even need to change a particular event. All they had to do was get rid of certain books or change what was written about those events. So, yes, history was important, but that didn’t mean she had to obsess over it the way he did.

“Sure, Dak,” she said.

After that, Abi led them to another room he had prepared with more cushions and pillows and blankets.

“You’ll sleep here,” he said. “You must be tired.”

Between their adventure in China, a whole day walking and running through the city, the big meal in her stomach, and the comfortable-looking bed in front of her, Sera was suddenly very tired.

“Get some rest,” Abi said. “Hopefully, we will have news of Tusi in the morning.”

They said good night, and he left.

Dak threw himself backward onto a pile of pillows. “I love this place.”

Riq fell sideways onto a thick blanket. “I gotta say, it’s pretty nice. I can’t believe Hulagu’s going to destroy it.”

“He’s not,” Dak said. “We got this.”

But something nagged at Sera. It had started when they were talking about history and books, and hadn’t let up. She reached up to tug the hair that wasn’t there anymore, a nervous habit left over from a time before she’d cut her hair short to disguise herself as a boy.

“What is it, dude?” Dak was looking at her. “You’re pulling on air there. Something’s bothering you.”

Dak was right about that, in a couple of ways. There *was* something bothering her, something huge — she’d seen the Cataclysm. But that wasn’t actually what she was thinking of at the moment.

“The SQ,” she said. “We haven’t identified a Time Warden here. They could be anywhere. They could be anyone. That just makes me nervous.”

“The SQ will show themselves,” Riq said. “They always do.”



Abi woke them the next morning with a delicious breakfast of fruits and nuts, with more bread. “It is just as I suspected,” he said as they ate.

“Tusi is coming to the palace today.”

“Will we go see him?” Sera asked.

“Yes, we leave shortly.”

Sera was excited about the idea of meeting the great mathematician, someone she actually knew about for a change. She was certain he would help them, once he knew the situation. She didn’t know how she would explain that situation, exactly, but she thought Abi would probably be able to do a better job than any of them.

They finished eating, and then Abi brought them some clothes to change into. Dak and Riq put on robes like most of the other men she’d seen. Sera put on a silk dress, with a beaded vest over a silk shirt with flowing sleeves. It was yet another dress, which she hated, but they all agreed they couldn’t go before the caliph dressed in their Chinese clothing. After they’d changed, Abi led them from their room, back down the corridors of the House of Wisdom, around the central courtyard, and out the front door. He turned toward the palace they had seen the day before, and guided them to it.

As they drew closer, Sera’s mouth hung open just a bit at the sight of it. The high walls, the domes, the towers. The palace guards admitted them through an imposing gate, after which they passed into a garden full of color. The plants here were obviously well cared for, and the air was heavy with floral fragrances. The scent of roses, in particular, struck Sera like a wave.

The dizzying fog of a Remnant fell over her, different from any she had ever felt before. Her past Remnants had always been vague, mostly feelings and impressions. But now, in this Remnant, she actually saw her mother. She was standing in a garden, pruning a white rosebush, a big, floppy hat on her head to keep the sun out of her eyes. She looked up, smiled, and beckoned for Sera to help her.

With that, the Remnant folded up and fluttered away, leaving Sera aching at what it had shown her. *Her mother*. Sera knew she had a

mother now, out there somewhere. She wasn't going to let the Cataclysm take her away.



## The Caliph

DAK NOTICED Sera rubbing her forehead. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“What?” She blinked and took a deep breath. “Yes, I’m okay.”

“A Remnant?” Riq asked. “In the barn?”

Dak did a double take. Sera had told Riq about her parents’ barn? It sounded like Riq knew more about what Sera experienced than Dak did, like the two of them had talked about it or something.

“No.” She shook her head. “Let’s — let’s just keep going. I’m fine.”

Riq looked worried, and so did Abi. Dak watched Sera, wishing he knew what Remnants were like, so he would know what she was going through. He didn’t like Riq knowing things about his best friend that even Dak didn’t know. But based on Riq’s behavior, Dak guessed Riq must have Remnants, too. He wondered what those Remnants were.

“This way,” Abi said.

They continued through the garden, and Dak heard a trumpeting sound up ahead.

“Is that” — Riq turned his head toward the noise — “an elephant?”

Abi nodded. “Yes, we are entering the Park of Wild Beasts.”

They entered a new part of the garden where pens and enclosures lined the path. They saw giraffes and zebras and four elephants decked out in huge sheets of pink silk with silver embroidery. They passed cages

rumbling with bears, lions, leopards, and tigers, some of which were led by chains held by what Dak assumed were very, very brave men.

“It’s a zoo,” Sera said.

“No, it’s a *menagerie*,” Dak said.

Riq lifted an eyebrow at him.

“What?” Dak said. “You’re not the only one who knows words.”

Riq chuckled and they moved on, past a large fountain, between two marble columns and into the palace. The floors were made of marble, too, carpeted by enormous rugs woven with many colors and intricate patterns of vines, flowers, and animals. Tapestries and silks hung from walls of stone and wood, which were covered in carvings. It all looked just how Dak had imagined it would when he’d read *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Guards patrolled the palace, but they didn’t stop Abi. He led the three of them through vast rooms, more courtyards, and into a second, inner garden. At the center of this garden was a shade tent, open on three sides. Near it stood a silver tree, with leaves of different colored metals. Jeweled birds of silver and gold perched throughout its branches, and they fluttered their wings and sang with the wind. Dak thought this must’ve been the kind of automata Abi had been talking about. Beneath the canopy, a man reclined on a sofa. His clothing was the fanciest Dak had seen so far, embroidered with golden threads, his turban made of a shiny material.

As soon as they’d taken a few steps into the garden, another man approached them. He was round, and he teetered toward them like a bowling pin. “What is the meaning of this, Abi?” he asked.

“Greetings, Grand Vizier,” Abi said. “We have come hoping to speak with Tusi, once he has spoken with the caliph.”

The vizier tipped his head sideways. “Is that so? What business do you have with Tusi?”

“It relates to the work of the House of Wisdom,” Abi said.  
“Something the caliph fully supports.”

“It is true the caliph has reverence and admiration for what you do. But as for whether you can speak with Tusi, you will have to ask the caliph yourself. You may approach him.”

Abi bowed. “Thank you, Vizier.”

Head bowed, he walked toward the man under the canopy. Dak imitated the gesture, and so did Sera and Riq. When Abi stopped at the edge of the tent, so did they. They waited a few moments as the vizier approached the man on the sofa, whom Dak assumed was the caliph, and whispered in his ear.

The caliph nodded and said, “You may approach, Abi.”

Abi motioned with his hand for Dak, Sera, and Riq to stay where they were. He inched toward the caliph slowly, and when he was a few feet away, he said, “Peace, Commander of the Faithful, and may God’s mercy be upon you.” Then Abi lowered himself to his knees and kissed the ground.

As he did so, several servants came up and sprinkled Dak, Sera, and Riq with water, and then retreated. A moment later, Dak caught the smell, and realized the water was some kind of rose-scented perfume. He wrinkled his nose. Great. Now he smelled like *flowers*.

“Rise, Ibn Abī al-Shukr,” the caliph said. “Tell me why you have come. My attendants say you’ve been asking about Tusi since yesterday.”

“Yes, Caliph.” Abi rose to his feet, but kept his head bowed. “I wish to speak with him about the fate of the House of Wisdom.”

“What fate?” the caliph said. “And why would it matter to Tusi, the adviser to Hulagu Khan, the aggressor who sits outside our very gate?”

“Only this, Caliph. If we remind Tusi of the wealth of knowledge in the House of Wisdom, and in the whole city, perhaps he can persuade

Hulagu Khan to spare the city the wanton destruction he has meted out against other cities before.”

The caliph leaned forward. “Who are those children with you? And that young man?”

Dak looked up. The caliph was asking about them.

“Have them come forward,” the caliph said.

Abi motioned them to approach. “They are students who have come from distant lands to learn at the House of Wisdom.”

Dak swallowed. Did they need to kiss the ground like Abi had? He didn’t know, but Sera and Riq didn’t seem like they were going to, so he stayed on his feet, but still kept his head down.

“Who are you?” the caliph asked. “And why are you here with Abi?”

Riq spoke up first. “As Abi said, we are students from distant lands.”

“What distant lands?” the caliph asked.

“Pennsylvania,” Dak said.

“Pennsylvania?” The caliph scratched under his turban with his pointer finger. “I have never heard of this country.”

“It’s far away,” Dak said. “Beyond . . .” He tried to think of a place. “Beyond Istanbul.”

“Where?”

*Oh, right, they haven’t changed the name yet.* “I mean, beyond Constantinople.”

“I see,” the caliph said.

The vizier was looking at Dak, Sera, and Riq like they had just sprouted tails or something, his expression stern.

“What do you study at the House of Wisdom?” the caliph asked.

“History,” Dak said.

“Mathematics,” Sera said.

“Linguistics,” Riq said.

“Varied disciplines,” the caliph said. “And what interest do you have in Tusi?”



“None,” Riq said. “But as foreigners, we couldn’t pass up the chance to come with Abi so we could see your famous palace.”

That was a good answer, Dak had to admit.

“My palace?” the caliph said. “And what do you think of my palace?”

“It’s amazing,” Dak said.

“It’s beautiful,” Sera said.

“It’s impressive,” Riq said.

“It is all three of those things and more,” Abi said.

“So it is,” the caliph said. “And now, your request. What do you think, Vizier?”

The vizier frowned. “The caliph has nothing to fear from anyone. Tusi will try to persuade you to accept the terms of surrender you have already wisely rejected. Baghdad is completely safe, and therefore, so is the House of Wisdom. Our women, alone, could defend the walls.”

The caliph nodded. “Abi, I do not care whether you speak with Tusi or not, because it is irrelevant. You heard my vizier. We are perfectly safe from conquest.”

*Actually, thought Dak, the exact opposite of that is true.*

“Go now,” the caliph said. “I will have my vizier bring Tusi to you once I have rejected Hulagu’s terms a second time.”

“Actually,” Dak said, “you might want to give those terms another look. The Mongols have been mostly undefeated in the expansion of their empire. When kings surrender to them, it usually goes okay for their people. But when kings *don’t* surrender, bad things happen.”

The caliph waved Dak off. “The Mongols shall suffer a rare defeat at Baghdad’s gates.”

Dak shook his head. “But —”

“Thank you, Caliph,” Abi said. He backed away, and Dak did the same. So did Sera and Riq. Once they reached the edge of the tent, they

turned and walked back toward the garden's entrance. The vizier came up behind them and waddled ahead.

"I will show you to a waiting room," he said.

They ended up in an open-air room surrounded by ornate arches and white marble columns. There were pillows and cushions on the ground, so they sat down and waited.

"He could just surrender," Dak said. "What I tried telling him was true. Hulagu spared lots of cities that surrendered. Cities that didn't surrender got pulverized. All you have to do is look at history so you don't repeat it."

"Let me guess," Riq said. "Now you're gonna tell us why history is so important and why you love it so much."

Dak felt his anger rising. "It's why *you* should love history instead of boring words, words, words."

"Stop it," Sera said. "Not in the palace."

Dak rolled his eyes. Riq was wrong, anyway. History was important, but that wasn't really why Dak loved it. He was still trying to figure that one out.



They waited quite a while. Dak was even starting to think he could close his eyes and take a nap. But then the vizier returned with a man who Dak assumed was Tusi. He wore a simple robe, with a white turban that wrapped around his head and dropped a tail of fabric down over his right shoulder. His beard was clean, smooth, and came to a point.

The vizier raised his voice a bit. "I present to you Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, emissary from Hulagu Khan." He took one last look at Dak and the others, scowling, and then he left.

Tusi waited, face blank, saying nothing.

Abi stepped forward. "I am Ibn Abī al-Shukr, and I am honored to meet you. Your reputation has spread far."

“And you have no reputation at all,” Tusi said. “Why did you wish to speak with me?”

Wow, Dak thought. *That was rude.*

Abi blinked, seeming a bit taken aback. “I . . . certainly hope to one day have even a fraction of your learning and wisdom.”

“Yes, yes,” Tusi said. “Speak your mind so that I might be on my way.”

Dak couldn’t believe this guy.

“The caliph does not believe the city will fall,” Abi said.

“No, he does not,” Tusi said. “He is a fool.”

“If the city does fall,” Abi said, “I am worried that our libraries, and the House of Wisdom, will meet the same fate as those at Alamut fortress, where Hulagu captured you and destroyed the books there.”

“He did not capture me,” Tusi said. “He freed me from the Ismā ‘īlī and allowed me to continue my work. Eventually, I became adviser to him.”

“And that is why we hope you might persuade Hulagu to spare the libraries. Spare the House of Wisdom.”

“No.” Tusi didn’t even act like he had given it half a thought.

“N-no?” Abi asked.

“No,” Tusi said.

“Why not?” Riq asked.

Tusi turned to him. “Because my position with Hulagu is tenuous. It would take very little provocation for him to execute me, as he has done with countless others. I have therefore chosen not to provoke him. That is the best way to stay alive and continue my studies.”

“So you won’t speak for the libraries?” Sera asked.

“No,” Tusi said. “I won’t speak for anyone or anything but myself. If the libraries are destroyed, with all the books in them, I will grieve, secure in the knowledge that nothing could have been done.”

“I don’t understand,” Abi said. “You are a scholar. You know what the House of Wisdom represents.”

Tusi’s eyes became sharp and narrow. “I know very well what it represents.”

No one said anything. Dak couldn’t believe this man, who had the power to maybe do something, but had refused to help. Where did that leave them?

“Is there anything more?” Tusi asked.

“No,” Abi said.

Tusi nodded. “Then I bid you farewell.” He turned and left.

After he had gone, Abi hung his head and shook it. “I don’t understand,” he repeated.

“What do we do now?” Dak asked.

“I don’t know,” Abi said.

“We come up with a new plan,” Riq said. “We still have time.”

“But I am troubled by something else,” Abi said. “I think Tusi might be SQ. I think he *wants* the House of Wisdom destroyed.”



## The Mongol War Camp

RIQ THOUGHT about what Abi had just said. It made sense to him. If Tusi was really SQ, of course he wouldn't help save the House of Wisdom. He would want it destroyed. Maybe that was why he was advising Hulagu Khan in the first place. He was making sure the job got done.

"You think Tusi is SQ?" Dak asked.

"I do," Abi said. "I cannot think of another reason why a scholar such as he would refuse to help save the House of Wisdom."

"I think I agree with Abi," Riq said.

"Well, I don't." Sera folded her arms. "I can't believe that a man like Tusi would be SQ."

"Why not?" Dak asked. "You saw how rude that guy was."

"He may be rude," Sera said. "But he's also a mathematician and a scientist. I've learned about him. He is not SQ."

"The SQ has plenty of scientists," Riq said. "Tusi wouldn't be the first."

Sera appeared unconvinced.

"Either way, he's not on our side," Riq said. "Where does that leave us?"

"Well, we have to assume Tusi is SQ," Dak said. "And we *know* the caliph is an idiot. So I guess that means we have to go to Hulagu ourselves. Right?"

Riq thought about their options. His experience during the Viking siege of Paris, trapped within the city once the attack had begun, left him convinced that Dak's suggestion was the best idea left to them. "Right."

"This will be very dangerous," Abi said. "You will be venturing into the Mongol war camp."

Riq looked down at the robe he was wearing. He didn't want to walk into the Mongol camp while in Baghdad clothing. But then he remembered that Mongolia and China were next-door neighbors. "We might want to change back into our Chinese clothing so we don't look too out of place."

"That's true," Abi said. "And the Mongols have drawn soldiers from every nation and race they've conquered. You may be able to blend in. Let's hope that's enough to keep you safe."



They waited until nightfall, and Abi led them through the city streets, back through the Perfume Market, the stores all closed up and shuttered, then under the grand archway that stood before the mosque they had passed the day before. On the other side of the arch, they turned to the right and followed a wide street.

There were still a few people out, hurrying along. The windows and wooden screens above them to either side pulsed with the yellow flicker of candlelight and lamplight, and Riq heard the sounds of music, singing, and laughter coming from inside the houses and apartments. These people had no idea the Mongols were going to begin their siege the following day.

"The caliph has made them all feel safe when they're not," Riq said.

"That is true," Abi said.

The Hystorian kept them to the sides of the streets, in the shadows, and when he saw the city guards, patrolling with torches and lamps, he

ducked the three time travelers into hiding places, down alleyways or behind street vendor stalls.

They came to a large intersection and turned left onto a new market street. The buildings here were larger and richer, almost like miniature palaces. Some distance on, Riq saw the city wall with a gate like the one they had first entered through the day before. But the gate was closed.

“How will we get out?” Riq asked Abi.

“We bribe the guards,” Abi said. “Not the most elegant solution, but effective.”

As they approached the gate, two guards stepped toward them and blocked their way.

“Greetings,” Abi said.

“What business brings you to the Halbah Gate at this time of night?” one of the guards asked.

“Business with you,” Abi said. “If you are interested in a transaction.”

“What kind of transaction?”

“The simple kind,” Abi said. “Money for a service.”

“How much money?”

“A dinar between you,” Abi said.

The guards paused. They looked at each other. “What’s the service?”

Abi pointed ahead. “Open the gate and let my young friends pass.”

The guards stared at them. Then one of them held out his open palm.

Abi reached into his robes and pulled out a coin. He placed it in the hand of the guard, who snatched it away. Riq flinched, hoping they would make good on their part of the bargain.

“The service?” Abi said.

The guard with the coin laughed through his nose. Then they both turned back to the gate, motioning for them to follow. They each pulled out a key, and unlocked a smaller door next to the larger city gate. The

guards ushered them through, into an enclosed courtyard within the thick wall, to a second door.

“You’re in the safest place you could be, right now,” one of the guards said. “Why would you want to go out there? The Mongols are out there.”

“We know,” Riq said.

They shrugged and opened the door.

Abi looked at each of them. “Hulagu’s war camp is due east. You won’t be able to miss it. Good luck to you.”

They said good-bye to him and stepped outside the city walls. The door shut behind them, and Riq heard the sound of the lock turning. The stars and moon overhead lit the desert around them with a cold, pale light. Riq could almost imagine the landscape was made of snow instead of sand.

“So, we just start walking?” Dak asked.

“Guess so,” Sera said.

Riq noticed the flicker of campfires on the horizon, like someone had stretched out a string of carnival lights. “I think that’s the war camp. Let’s get going.”

They set off across the sand, the chill of night around them.

“How far away do you think that is?” Dak asked.

“It’s pretty close to the edge of our horizon,” Sera said. “Which, given our height, would make it two to three miles away.”

Riq picked up their pace. They had to get there as fast as they could. The siege would begin tomorrow.



Dak spouted facts about the Mongols on the way, and Riq just gritted his teeth and let the kid go. He explained that they were one of the most successful conquering empires in the history of the world, more or less undefeated in most of their battles. Often, they didn’t even have to fight.



Their enemies heard the Mongols were coming, and they just gave up. Some even believed that when the Mongols came, they were a divine punishment, so it was pointless to fight. Every single Mongol man was a warrior, and families traveled together on their military campaigns.

“That’s why I don’t understand what the caliph is doing,” Dak said. “That vizier gave him the worst possible advice.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Riq said. “What’s done is done. We just have to stop Tusi.”

“It’s *not* Tusi,” Sera said.

Riq just shook his head.

A few steps later, Dak piped up. “Did you know the Mongols tended to get hit by lightning a lot? There weren’t any trees where they came from. Thunder terrified them.”

Riq rolled his eyes. “Give it a rest, both of you.”

They walked in silence after that, except for the scuff of their feet through the sand and the hiss of the wind. The emptiness of the desert left Riq time and room to think. And he didn’t actually want to think right now. Any time he had a chance to think, his thoughts went to the future. Or his lack of future.

There was really only one thing Riq had thought of to do when the time came to return to the future. He couldn’t risk traveling to an era where he’d be a complete anomaly. So he’d have to stay behind somewhere in the past, while Sera and Dak went back to the future to get their new SQuare. Then they could come back and pick him up to finish the remaining Great Breaks. He didn’t know when he should tell them his plan, or how to convince them, but he’d have to do it soon.

“The desert is a little creepy,” Dak said. “Like there’s no one else in the world. It’s like what the world would be after the Cataclysm.”

“Don’t talk about that.” Sera’s voice came out sounding sharp, almost angry.

Dak kept going. “I’m just saying —”

Sera stopped walking. "I said not to talk about it!"

"Geez, dude," Dak said, turning back to her. "Why don't you just tell us what's bothering you, already?"

"Nothing is bothering me," Sera said.

"Right," Dak said. "Just like nothing is bothering Riq."

Riq didn't say anything. He just kept walking.

"It's something to do with the Cataclysm," Dak said. "Obviously. So what is it?"

Sera resumed walking again, and Dak trotted to catch up.

"Well?" he said.

"It's . . ." Sera said.

Dak waited a minute. "It's what?"

Sera wiped at something in her eye.

"Are you crying?" Dak asked.

"I GOT SAND IN MY EYE!" Sera said. She'd obviously been pushed too far.

Dak's voice softened. "Sera, I didn't mean —"

"Leave it alone, Dak," Riq said. "She'll tell you when she's ready."

"Has she told *you*?" Dak asked.

Riq looked at Sera. They'd talked a bit about their Remnants back during the Viking siege of Paris. And here they were again. What was it about battles that brought this stuff up? Sera shook her head at Riq, telling him not to say anything.

Well, he sure didn't like being put in the middle of this.

"Dak, she'll tell *us* when she's ready." Which was the truth.

"You know what? I don't like secrets!" Dak said. "I need to know what's going on! It's like we're falling apart here, when we need to come together and be a team."

Riq had to admit the kid had a point. But he still wasn't ready to say anything about his own problems yet, and apparently Sera wasn't either.

"Let's just keep moving, Dak," Sera said. "Please?"

Dak folded his arms.

Sera touched his arm. "Please, Dak."

Dak relaxed his frown. "Fine. Okay. Let's go."

Riq was glad the two of them had worked it out, at least for now. They picked up their march again, the lights of the Mongol war camp pretty close now. Riq could see shadows moving in front of the campfires, silhouettes he couldn't quite make out. He heard dogs barking and horses neighing, and the clamor and ring of metal.

Once they reached the first few tents, Riq realized their plan was going to be a lot harder than he'd thought. The Mongol war camp was less like a camp and more like a mobile city. It was huge. And warriors stood armed and ready at every turn.



## The Truth About Tusi

“IT’S ENORMOUS,” Sera whispered. There were so many of the round tents, all arranged in a very orderly way. But what amazed Sera were the horses. They were everywhere. Lots of them. More than she could count. It seemed like the horses outnumbered the people five to one. Some of the horses had stuffed dummies mounted on them, as if the Mongols were trying to give the impression of more riders than they actually had.

“Let’s look for Hulagu’s tent,” Dak said. “It will definitely stand out from the rest.”

They snuck in between the tents, through the shadows, moving deeper and deeper into the Mongol territory. With each step, Sera had the feeling that this was the wrong way to go about saving the library. She didn’t think there was any way they would be able to convince Hulagu Khan to do anything. It was ridiculous. She thought they should instead try to find Tusi. She believed they could convince him somehow to help them. He was an amazing scientist, and he simply could not be SQ.

But no one had listened to her, even though she’d been right about a lot of things before.

The men in the Mongol army all wore the same uniform: a long wool coat that crossed in the front, buttoned under the right armpit, and was secured at the waist by a thin hide belt and wide sash. Leather armor was over that, to which scales and rings and other bits of metal had been

attached. The women wore clothes pretty similar to the men, except without the armor, and some wore beaded, colored headdresses. They even wore pants like the men, which seemed practical for people who rode horses every day, and it made Sera smile.

The smoke of the fire and the smells of the food they cooked filled the air, and Sera saw that Abi had been right about the diversity in the Mongol empire. The three of them could pretty much fit right in. Their translation devices picked up a few different languages from the snippets of conversation they overheard.

They kept moving. And moving. All the tents started to look the same to Sera, and she wondered if they were going in circles.

“Guys,” Sera said, “I’m just going to say one more time: I don’t think Tusi is SQ.”

“Oh, for the love of mincemeat,” Dak said.

“We’ve been over this,” Riq said.

Sera wanted to yell at them, but she tightened her lips and kept it inside.

More tents and more tents and more tents. And more horses.

“You wouldn’t think they were going to battle tomorrow,” Riq said. “Most everyone seems to be asleep.”

“I think the Mongols slept pretty easy,” Dak said. “They know how it’s going to go down in Baghdad.”

“What’s that up there?” Riq nodded ahead.

An enormous white tent materialized out of the night sky, towering over the war camp. It seemed to be almost as big as a small baseball stadium. Sera figured that had to be Hulagu Khan’s tent.

Now that they knew where they were going, the three of them hurried forward, but they hadn’t gone far before Sera noticed the closer they got to the khan’s tent, the more guards she saw posted, men wearing conical helmets with tufted points at the top, some with fringes of fur. Each of them had two swords, and some also had axes.

“We’ll never be able to get close to Hulagu,” Sera whispered.

Riq said, “Did you think he was going to send out an invite and roll out the red carpet?”

“No,” Sera said. “I just don’t know how we’ll do this.”

“I do,” Dak said. “I know just the thing.”

Sera recognized that tone. It was the tone Dak used when he *thought* he knew just the thing, but hadn’t stopped to actually think through that thing.

“Dak, stop and think first,” Sera said.

Dak smiled. “I already did when I got the idea.” He started forward, toward a group of guards.

“Dak!” Sera whispered. “Come back!”

But he was already too far away to hear her.

“That dumb kid,” Riq said.

“Easy,” Sera said. “He’s still my best friend.”

She and Riq watched as Dak strode right out of the shadows, swinging his arms wide in a high-footed march. Like he was *trying* to draw attention. The guards shouted a cry of alarm and swarmed him, weapons drawn.

“Oh, for the love of mi —” Riq stopped. “Was I seriously about to just say that?”

“Yup,” Sera said.

Riq nodded. “Perfect. Just perfect. You stay here.” He crept forward a few steps, and then marched out of the tents toward Dak and the guards. They instantly seized him, too. Sera strained forward to hear what they were saying, chewing on her lip, watching and waiting. She had no idea what Dak had planned here, but it made no sense to her.

After a few moments of questioning, the guards took hold of Dak’s and Riq’s arms and heaved them in the opposite direction of Hulagu’s tent.

“No, wait!” Dak shouted. “We’re spies! From Baghdad! You need to take us before Hulagu! You were supposed to send us to Hulagu!”

So that had been his plan. But now they were taking him someplace else, a prisoner. Riq was shaking his head. He glanced in Sera’s direction at one point, and gave a little nod, even though Sera knew he couldn’t see her. It was all up to her now.



Sera was torn. Should she follow Dak and Riq and see where the Mongols were taking them, or should she go forward with the mission in the way she thought was best? If she did that, she would try to find Tusi.

In another moment, she would lose sight of Dak and Riq. She hesitated, and the moment she had to act was gone. They rounded a tent and disappeared. Sera felt a sickening hollow spreading in her stomach, but decided to hope they could take care of themselves. She would work on saving the House of Wisdom. Fixing the Break. *Saving her parents.*

Everything she did now was for them and to prevent the coming Cataclysm that would take them away from her.

She turned toward Hulagu’s massive tent and crept forward. She actually had an easier time staying hidden without Dak and Riq. She was smaller and quieter than they were. The tent only got bigger as she got closer to it. When she finally had a view of the front entrance, with dozens of guards and horses, it confirmed to her that it would be impossible to get to Hulagu that way. Which was why her plan was better.

But how could she find Tusi? She figured he, as the khan’s adviser, would probably have a nice tent, and it would probably be near Hulagu’s. Sera started scouting around. There was a ring of tents around the khan’s, and they were bigger and richer than the plain ones they’d seen since entering the camp. These were embroidered and painted. But none of

them had any features that came right out and said, “Astronomer and mathematician inside.”

It took quite a while, but Sera made it all the way around Hulagu’s tent, sneaking past guards and regular Mongol warriors, without finding any sign. She was frustrated and discouraged. If Tusi was inside one of the tents nearby, she had no way of knowing. If he was somewhere else in the vast war camp, she had no way of finding him at all.

She kicked at the ground in frustration, and that’s when she noticed something. There were markings in the dirt. Geometric markings with writing next to them. The writing looked like Arabic, but the markings were clearly diagrams. Specifically, two circles, one half the size and inside the other. It was the Tusi Couple. A bench leaned up against the tent right in front of the markings, and Sera could picture the whole scene:

Tusi, sitting on the bench, drawing in the dirt, working through problems. This tent had to be his. It had to be. Who else would have drawn these things?

She waited until the guards had passed, and then sneaked around to the tent entrance. With a deep breath, she stepped inside.

The inside of the tent was really comfortable. Thick rugs covered the floor in overlapping layers around a central wooden support post as thick as a small tree. Tapestries and silks hung from the sides of the tent, and tables around the room bore stacks of books and many brass instruments. In one area of the room, Sera saw a pile of cushions and pillows. When she focused on them, she realized there was someone sitting there, perfectly still, and she almost jumped.

It was Tusi. Staring at her.

“He-hello,” she said. “I didn’t see you there. Do you remember me?”

“Of course,” Tusi said. “Why and how have you come here?”

“I came with my two friends,” Sera said. “You met them. We came to convince you.”



“Convince me of what?”

“To save the House of Wisdom.”

Tusi sighed. He looked down at his lap, and Sera realized he had a book there, which he closed. Here he was with his books, stacks upon stacks of them, but he refused to do anything to save the books of Baghdad.

“Let me tell you something,” he said.

Sera put her hands on her hips. “What?”

“After making me his adviser, Hulagu Khan came to me before this military campaign against Baghdad and asked me if the stars would smile favorably upon it. Now, I had a choice to make. I knew Hulagu *wanted* to attack Baghdad. If I had told him the stars were ill-favored, he may have spared the city for a time, but he would have been upset with *me*. He may have even executed me. But if I told him what he wanted to hear, that the stars were favorable to his ambitions, then he would be pleased with me.”

“So you lied?”

“The movement of the stars is constant. However, the *interpretation* of those movements can be much more flexible.”

Sera closed her eyes and shook her head. “That still just sounds like lying to me.”

“You are young. When you are older, you will find that life is less absolute than you might wish it to be. There are few things you can truly rely upon other than the laws of the universe. And yourself.”

Sera thought about that, and it sounded like a sad way to live. “I can rely on my friends. I can rely on my . . . *family*.” As she said the word, its meaning shifted in her mind, gaining a new weight, a substance that included her parents in a way it never had before.

Tusi smiled. “If your friends and family be as constant as the movement of the stars, count yourself very lucky, indeed.”

Sera walked over to the cushions and sat down. “The House of Wisdom contains many, many important books. They must be saved for future generations. Don’t you see that?”

“Of course I see it. But there is nothing I can do.”

“Hulagu Khan might listen to you.”

“That’s not a chance I am willing to take.”

“Are you SQ?” She blurted out the question before she’d decided if she should.

“Am I what?” She saw no recognition of the name in his eyes. Just genuine confusion. If he had been SQ, he would have realized in that moment that she was a Hystorian, and things would have gotten a lot worse.

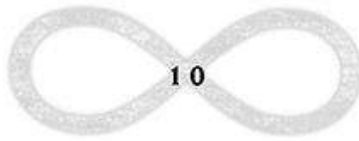
Sera sighed, vindicated. “Nothing. My mistake.”

“What is your mistake?”

*It was a mistake coming to you for help*, she thought. But she said, “Nothing.”

Tusi rose to his feet. “When the Ismā ‘īlī captured me and took me to their fortress at Alamut, I had a choice to make. I could resist and most likely perish, or I could adapt to them and continue my work. I chose to adapt and continue my work. When Hulagu Khan destroyed the fortress and freed me, I saw another opportunity. I could perish, or I could join him and continue my work. Again, I chose to continue my work.” He looked around his tent. “I continue it now, and I will continue it if every library in the world burns. The work is all that matters to me. My work. I can’t let anything get in the way of that, so I cannot risk what you are asking of me. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Sera said. “You may not be SQ, but you’re still not the man I thought you were.”



## The Divine Man

DAK'S IDEAS hadn't been turning out so well lately. He couldn't see what the problem was. They all seemed like good ideas when he first got them. But the trouble with ideas was that you often didn't know if they would turn out to be good until it was way too late to change them.

Like right now. Not a good idea to go walking up to Hulagu's guards asking to be arrested. Obviously. But now Dak and Riq were captured, and the Mongols were taking them in the opposite direction of where they needed to go.

"Sorry I got us into this," Dak said.

Riq shook his head. "I'll be sure to give you a hard time about it later. For now, we need to figure out what we're going to do."

"Sera will come for us," Dak said.

"Maybe. But we can't count on it. If she's smart, she's working on fixing the Break, not our mistakes." He paused, and then said very quietly, "The fate of the world is more important than any of our individual fates."

Okay, Dak *knew* there was something going on with the Cataclysm that these two weren't telling him. He hated that. He hated not knowing. He hated the uncertainty. It got his mind going, and then his fears, and soon his fears were outracing his thoughts. But he figured there wouldn't

be any point asking Riq about it. Dak knew the guy didn't like him much, and wasn't about to open up.

"Where are you taking us?" Dak asked the Mongol warriors.

At first, they were silent.

"The Divine Man," one of the Mongols said at last.

"What does he mean?" Riq asked.

Dak shrugged. He had no idea. But when they arrived at a wide tent, he figured they were about to find out.

The Mongol warriors shoved them inside and pushed them to the ground. Dak looked around the tent. It was supported by four columns, and had numerous tables laid out with maps and charts. There was one sitting area, with cushions and pillows, but no rugs. This tent was a tent of war, not a tent of luxury.

A man looked up from the table he'd been leaning over and made eye contact with Dak. Dak immediately bowed his head. There was something about the man that provoked an instant fear. But Dak didn't like that, so he made himself look back up.

The man was not especially tall, but something about him felt as strong and hard as a bronze statue. He came around the table, slowly, and stood in front of them, his hands clasped behind his back.

"I am General Guo Kan," he said.

"That's a Chinese name," Riq said. "You're working for the Mongols? I thought you were enemies."

"The great khan will accept anyone of ability, no matter how high or low one's birth, or one's nationality. Our army is full of men from all corners of the Earth. The engineers of our siege engines are the best minds in the world."

"Are you the Divine Man?" Dak asked.

"There are some who call me that."

"Why?" Riq asked.

"Because I have yet to be defeated in battle. Who are you?"

Dak didn't know what to say. What kind of lie could they tell that Guo Kan couldn't pick apart easily?

"We're just travelers," Riq said. "We arrived in Baghdad two days ago, and we decided to try to leave before the battle begins."

"But my men tell me you were asking to be brought before Hulagu Khan." The general made a slicing motion with his hand, some kind of order, and the men holding Dak began to rummage in his clothing, and squeeze his arms and legs, his torso. They were searching him, and of course they came up empty. "No weapons," Guo Kan said. "You weren't going to assassinate him. So why did you wish an audience with him?"

"We —" Riq faltered. "We're just travelers."

"Judging by your clothing, your language, and your demeanor, you must have come from very far away."

"We did," Riq said. "And we'd like to go now, if you don't mind."

Guo Kan looked up at his men. "Leave us. All of you."

Dak wondered what the general was doing. Why did he want everyone to leave?

When they were alone, Guo Kan smiled. "You don't know who I am. But I know who you are. Believe me when I tell you, the libraries of Baghdad will fall. There is nothing you can do to change the course of history."

Dak snapped upright. He looked at Riq, then up at Guo Kan. "You're SQ." Dak had walked himself and Riq right into the hands of the enemy.

"And you are Hystorians." Guo Kan smiled again. "Correction. You *were* Hystorians. Now where is the other one?"

"Other what?" Riq said.

"The girl."

Dak almost gasped. "Wh-what girl?"

"The girl my spies tell me you've been seen with."

"We don't know who you're talking about," Riq said.

“Really?” Guo Kan’s eyebrows lifted in mock surprise. “The Market Inspector and the vizier know exactly who I’m talking about.”

Dak’s shock prevented him from saying anything in response. The Time Wardens had been aware of them almost from the beginning.

“Now that we’ve cleared that up,” Guo Kan said, “I assume she has the device you use to travel in time.”

“We lost that device.” Dak lifted his hands and wiggled his fingers. “I’m pretty clumsy.”

“You are also a miserable liar.” Guo Kan called one of his men back inside. The warrior bowed, and Guo Kan said, “I want every tent in the camp searched for intruders before dawn. Get word out to the *tümen* commanders. Immediately.”

“Yes, General,” the man said, and left.

Dak swallowed, and worried about Sera. He didn’t know where she was, but there was a good chance they’d find her.

“She’s in the city,” Riq said. “She didn’t come with us.”

“Of course she didn’t.” Guo Kan’s gloating smile seemed to fill the tent. “If you are all the Hystorians have to send against us, the SQ has nothing to fear.”

“Funny,” Dak said. “The Time Wardens in the last eight places we’ve been all thought the same thing. Didn’t turn out too well for them.”

Guo Kan’s smile shrank just a little. “Tides change.”

“So does history,” Riq said. “We’ve changed it.”

“Not this time,” Guo Kan said. “I am the Divine Man. I do not fail. And your failure here, now, will make all of your previous victories worthless.”

His words stole the breath from Dak. Guo Kan was right. Failing just one mission would prove disastrous regardless of how much they’d accomplished. “Wh-what are you going to do with us?” Dak asked.

“For now, keep you here. I will find your friend and then I’ll take the device and put an end to all three of you. In the meantime, I have a city

to invade. And a library of Aristotle's books to destroy."



Dak and Riq sat on the ground, tied to one of the tent's support posts. They'd been left there for hours. Neither the guards nor Guo Kan had come back with Sera, and Dak chose to view that as a good thing. It meant she was still out there somewhere. Still free.

"I guess Sera was right," Riq said. "About Tusi."

"Guess so," Dak said. "But do we have to tell her that? We'll never live it down."

Riq chortled. "You're right. She'd milk that for all it's worth."

Dak laughed, too. "So what do we do, n — ?"

"*Shh.*" Riq cocked his head. "Do you hear that?"

Dak paid closer attention. He heard a rhythmic sound, a deep and pounding drumbeat. The noise of high-pitched howling and voices shouting. The thunder of horse hoofbeats. It almost felt like the ground shook beneath Dak where he sat.

"The Mongol army is on the move," Riq said. "It must be dawn. The siege of Baghdad has begun."

"So we have to get back there," Dak said. "We have to get back into the city and find some other way to save the books."

"These ropes have a different idea about that."

"Well, what can we do about them?"

"I don't know," Riq said. "Wiggle?"

"Worth a try." Dak was aware of the fact that Riq was being sarcastic, as usual. But there didn't seem to be any other options. So for the next several minutes, the two twisted, shook, pulled, and worked at the knots, hoping they would start to loosen. But they almost seemed to tighten on the boys the more they tried to escape.

"Got any other ideas?" Dak asked.

“Nope. And why do I always have to come up with the ideas, anyway?”

“What do you mean? I have ideas!”

“Like the one that landed us here? Like telling a story about time travel in front of half the city? I meant *good* ideas, Dak.”

Dak’s face fell into a deep scowl. He knew not all of his ideas played out how he imagined. He knew he sometimes did things without thinking them all the way through. But wasn’t doing something better than doing nothing?

“It always falls on me,” Riq said. “That’s how it’s been this whole time. Well, one day, I might not be there for you two.”

Dak was about to argue with the idea that Riq was the one who always managed to save the day, when the second part of what he’d just said really sunk in. “What do you mean, you might not be there?”

Riq was silent. He opened his mouth. Then he closed it. “Nothing.”

Dak wondered if this had something to do with whatever had been bothering Riq. Something to do with his Remnants, or whatever it was. “No, really, what do you mean?”

“Just drop it.”

“Fine. But don’t say I didn’t try.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. And now I guess *I’ll* have to come up with an idea. A *good* one.” Dak looked up at the post where it joined with the top of the tent. He looked down at the foundation in the ground. It didn’t seem to be buried or mounted to anything. “What if we both try to pull the same direction to move the bottom of the post?”

“We’ll bring the tent down,” Riq said. “And they’ll know we’re trying to escape. There’re guards outside the door.”

“Then we run.”

Riq didn’t say anything.

“We have to do something,” Dak said.



Riq sighed. "Okay. Let's give it a try. Gently at first."

They shinnied their ropes up the post until they were both standing, and then they both pulled to the same side at the same time. The post lurched a little at the base.

"It's working," Riq said.

"I told you. Keep going."

"Just a bit at a time. We don't want to attract attention or bring the tent down until we're ready."

So for the next several minutes, they jerked and budged the base of the post a fraction of an inch at a time until it seemed like another tug or two would pop it free of the sand. The tent sagged a little, but so far no one had seemed to notice. Or at least, no one had come in.

"Okay," Riq said. "When the post comes free, we'll have to try really hard not to get tangled. We have to slide our ropes down off the post, and then somehow find our way out the entrance. Are you ready?"

"Ready," Dak said.

"On the count of three. One, two, three!"

They pulled hard together, the base of the post popped free, and the top of the tent folded and fell inward on them. It caught them both in the same hollow, the silk fabric rubbing the tops of their heads. Shouts sounded outside, the guards now fully alerted. Dak and Riq maneuvered the ropes, sliding them back down the post, until they came off the bottom, and without the post, the knots fell loose and away from their wrists.

The sounds of the guards shouting drew closer, burrowing into the tent, coming toward them.

"Okay," Dak said. "What now?"

"I don't know," Riq said. "This was *your* good idea!"

"Well, I don't know!" Dak said.

They heard a sudden tearing sound behind them as the tip of a knife rent the fabric. Another warrior, cutting his way in to find them? Dak

could only watch as the knife worked its way down, opening up a large, tattered slit.

“You guys coming?” came a familiar voice from outside.

“Sera?” Dak poked his head through the opening, and there she was, standing over them, knife in hand. Dak scurried out, and Riq followed after him.

“Let’s go,” Riq said. “Before the guards figure out we’ve slipped out the back way.”



## The Mongol Siege

RIQ LED them back through the Mongol camp, which seemed deserted compared to the previous night. They raced between tents, dodging and weaving, trying to stay out of sight of the women and children and others who had stayed behind when the army had marched out. Riq listened for sounds of pursuit behind them, but heard none. When they reached the edge of the camp, he saw a cloud of dust and sand ahead of them, kicked up by the riding army, rising up into the air over Baghdad.

“So, just for clarification,” Sera said, “we’re trying to find our way through that battlefield, and somehow get back inside the city to figure out a new plan to save the House of Wisdom, right?”

“Right!” Dak said.

“Easy,” said Riq with a wry smile.

“You were right about Tusi,” Dak said to Sera. “He’s not SQ.”

“I know,” Sera said.

“Well, you don’t have to be cocky about it,” Dak said. “You didn’t *really* know until I just told you.”

“No, I know because I asked him last night.”

“You did?” Dak asked.

“Yes.”

“You found him?” Riq asked.

“I did.” Sera shook her head. “He hid me when the camp was being searched. And then he told me where to find you two. But he still won’t help us save the library. Which means he might as well be SQ, even if he isn’t.”

“Well, that’s that,” Riq said. “We’ll make a new plan with Abi.” He started off across the desert sand. “The good news is that we’re moving *with* the Mongol army. Less likely to get trampled by their horses that way.”

“Thanks for that,” Dak said. “But you should know the Mongols were famous for being able to shoot their bows in any direction *while* galloping on their horses, with deadly accuracy. Even backward. Which is where we’ll be coming from.”

“Thanks for *that*,” Sera said.

“They’ll be focused on the city,” Riq said. At least, that was what he hoped.

They trudged across the miles of sand between the war camp and the city, getting steadily closer. Baghdad waited ahead, appearing helpless and small, while the Mongol army seemed to stretch from one edge of the horizon to the other, completely surrounding the city walls. The bulk of the army’s movement and forces seemed to be concentrated straight ahead of them on a part of the wall with a massive tower.

Riq didn’t think the three of them would be able to get anywhere near the gates on this side of Baghdad. They’d have to circle around and use the river to get to the House of Wisdom.



By the time they reached the Mongol army, the warriors had assumed their formations. The sights and smells presented a vivid reminder to Riq of the Viking army back in Paris, but the Mongols appeared much more disciplined and organized. The sound of their assault was deafening.

The bulk of the cavalry hung back at the rear, while before them the Mongol siege engines had begun to pound the city. Catapults hurled huge rocks at Baghdad's walls, and giant crossbows fired burning bolts right over them. Riq could only imagine the fear and destruction that must be raging through the streets inside. It was obvious that the city couldn't last long under such an attack.

In front of the siege engines, Mongol archers raced forward on horseback, galloped along the walls, firing arrow after arrow up at the city's soldiers, and then retreated behind the line. The bravery and skill of their maneuvers were pretty amazing.

The three of them crept along behind all the action, unnoticed, or at least ignored.

"We'll swing around to the other side of the city," Riq said. "Then we'll use a boat to make our way down the river to the Wharf of the Needle-Makers. Sound good?"

"Sounds good," Sera said.

"Lead on," Dak said.

So they swung around behind the army, under the desert sun, as all along Baghdad's walls, the Mongols maintained a constant barrage. It took quite some time for them to even see the river away to the northwest, but when they did, Riq had sudden doubts about his plan.

Mongol forces lined the shore thickly enough that he worried they wouldn't be able to reach the river.

"We'll just have to sneak past them onto a boat," Sera said.

Riq turned to Dak. Here was a rare moment when his knowing something about history might actually be useful. "How long did the siege last?" he asked.

"Seven days," Dak said. "Then the Mongols took over that big tower we saw, called the Persian Tower."

"Then we have a little time. I think we should hide out and try to cross the river at night," Riq said. "We'll be more likely to sneak past

them that way.”

So they hunkered down in a shallow wash and waited for night to fall. The sun passed overhead, and the hours ticked by. It didn't take long for Riq to feel the effects of not having any food or water. His lips and throat got dry. Hunger gnawed at his insides. The physical discomfort added to his fear and dread about what the future held for him.

He'd been close to telling Dak about it back in Guo Kan's tent, but in the end he couldn't bring himself to do it. It was like he was afraid to say it out loud. Like that would make it more real somehow. He was also unsure of *how* to say it. For all the languages he knew, sometimes it was still hard to find the right words for some things.

“Do you wonder what's going on in the future?” Dak asked. “What the world looks like with the Breaks we've fixed?”

Riq froze at the question. He noticed Sera did, too.

“Like the first Break. I bet there's a lot of stuff named after Columbus now.” Dak traced his finger in the sand, a zigzag, like he was connecting invisible dots. “I bet French history is pretty different since the SQ weren't able to stop the Revolution. It's, like, nothing is settled. Everything is up in the air. Everything we're doing is making changes.”

“You seem a little bothered by that,” Sera said. “Isn't that the point of what we're doing here?”

“I guess,” Dak said.

“You guess?” Sera asked.

“I mean yes,” Dak said. “Of course that's the point. It's just . . .”

“Just what?” Riq asked.

Dak frowned. “History is supposed to be settled.”

“It will be,” Riq said. “When we're finished with the mission, it will be settled once and for all.”



They waited until the sun had gone down completely, and the sky was a deep black all the way across. The sounds of battle had faded in the darkness, but fires all along the front lines showed the Mongols were still there, waiting to resume their full assault with the dawn. By moonlight, Riq, Sera, and Dak scurried toward the river.

They aimed for a dark, empty spot between two campfires, around which warriors sat and slept. Riq hoped that with the light in their eyes, the Mongols wouldn't be able to see too far into the shadows. The time travelers slipped down to the river's edge in single file, where the moon glistened over the inky water, and the sound of it lapping the shore hid some of the sounds they made.

A cluster of small boats rocked gently with the current, bumping into one another and against the small dock to which they were tied. The three of them waded into the river toward them, the water chilly against Riq's skin. Dak went to the ropes securing the boats, while Sera climbed into one and kept herself low.

"I'm going to let them all loose," Dak whispered. "That way, they won't have a boat nearby to follow us, and they won't know which one we're in."

"Good idea," Riq whispered back. Apparently, the kid did have them on occasion.

Once the ships were floating free, Dak gave them each a push out into the river, where the current grabbed them and pulled them away. Riq held on to Sera's boat, and once Dak had climbed into it, Riq heaved it out into the river and scrambled on board after them.

"Well," Sera said, "that went we —"

A cry of alarm sounded on the bank.

Riq turned back to see shadows racing from the campfires down to the shoreline.

"Do you think they can see us?" Dak asked.

Something hissed and splashed in the water near the ship. An arrow.

“I’d say so,” Riq said. “Quick, grab the oars!”

They swung the paddles out over the water and plowed ahead as fast as they could. More arrows flew at them, striking the water, a couple of them even hitting the hull of the ship.

“We got lucky,” Dak said. “I don’t think they can see us very well.”

“They can see well enough,” Riq said.

They paddled ferociously until their boat was out of range of the archers, but Riq didn’t feel like they could let up. They had to reach the Wharf of the Needle-Makers quickly in case the Mongols decided to round up some other boats and come after them.

They moved down the river, and before long, the buildings of Baghdad stood to either side. The city lights reflected toward them in wavering strips along the river. The caliph’s palace soon came into view, and Riq steered the craft toward the shoreline near it.

They came up to the Wharf of the Needle-Makers, and above it Riq saw the House of Wisdom. He relaxed a bit and breathed a sigh of relief, a little amazed they had made it back into the city from the Mongol war camp. They pulled up alongside the pier, and Dak jumped out. He tied the boat off, and then helped Sera up. Riq followed after him, but before he’d quite gained his footing, someone shouted.

“Halt!”

Riq turned as half a dozen of the city guards approached them, swords drawn.

“Spies!” one of the guards shouted.

Riq held up his hands. “We’re not spies. We’re visiting scholars at the House of Wisdom. We’re your allies.”

The guards surrounded them, still brandishing their weapons.

“What proof do you have?” one of the guards asked.

“Seriously?” Dak said. “Just go get Abi and he’ll tell you.”

“You’re friends of the traitor Abi?” the guard asked. “Then I have a better idea. We’ll take you to the grand vizier, and let him decide what to



do with you.”

“Traitor?” Dak asked.

“Great!” Sera said. “Take us to the vizier.”

Riq opened his eyes wide and stared at her. “No, not great!”

“Why?” Sera asked. “The vizier knows who we are. He can vouch for us.”

“No,” Dak said. “You don’t get it. Hulagu’s general Guo Kan is a Time Warden, and he told us about his spies in the city. The vizier is SQ!”



## Imprisoned

THE GUARDS marched Sera, Dak, and Riq up from the river toward the palace. Knowing the SQ had agents both outside *and* inside the city made the situation seem that much more hopeless. But Sera refused to give up. She couldn't. They had to fix the Break no matter what.

"At least we know why the vizier gave the caliph such bad advice," Dak said. "He was working from the inside to make sure Baghdad gets destroyed."

"Yes," Riq said. "And that makes me feel so much better about being his prisoner."

They entered a smaller building near the palace. It had thick walls and very narrow windows. The guards pushed the three of them ahead, down a hallway, into one of several cells. Metal squealed as the guards swung the iron bars shut on them and locked the door, then left without another word.

"So this isn't good," Sera said.

"Hystorians?" The voice came from across the hallway in the cell opposite theirs. Abi stepped forward from the shadows. "Is that you?"

"Yes!" Sera felt relieved to see him again, even here. "Are you all right, Abi?"

"I am unharmed," he said. "They arrested me shortly after I helped you get out of the city. Were you able to convince Hulagu to spare the

libraries?”

“We never even saw him,” Dak said. “Riq and I got caught by General Guo Kan, who’s a Time Warden, by the way. Sera tried one more time to convince Tusi, but he wouldn’t listen to her.”

Abi hung his head, and the broad smile he normally wore fell from his face. “Then it seems we have lost hope.”

“Please don’t say that.” Sera had to fight pretty desperately within herself to keep from feeling the same way. There had to be another option. Something they hadn’t thought of. If she still had her long hair, she’d be pulling it clean out right now as she studied the bars and their cell for a way to escape.

“It’s okay,” Riq said. “We’ll think of something.”

“Right,” Dak said. “This isn’t the first cell we’ve been locked in.”

Sera took a deep breath. Then she grabbed hold of the bars and tested them one by one to see if any of them were loose. They weren’t. She went to the narrow window and peered outside. Their cell wasn’t up high, so there wasn’t a fall to worry about on the other side. The window was just too small. But the mud bricks were soft enough that they might be able to chip away at them if they had some kind of tool.

“Do any of you have anything on you?” she asked.

All the three of them had with them were the Infinity Ring and the SQuare. But from deep within his robes, Abi pulled out a small knife.

“They missed this when they arrested me,” he said. “I keep it on me for sharpening quills. It’s useless for anything more than that.”

“Maybe not,” Sera said. “Can you toss it over?”

Abi approached his bars and stuck his arm through them. “Watch out. Here it comes.”

He lobbed the knife gently into the air, and it sailed toward them. But it clanged against their cell door and bounced back into the middle of the hallway.

Sera rushed up to the door with Dak and Riq. Abi's arm still hung through his own cell's bars. They all stared at the knife on the ground between them.

"I'm a scholar, not an athlete," Abi said. "I never could throw well."

Riq dropped to the ground. "My arms are the longest." He reached through the bars, along the ground, straining to reach the knife. The tip of his middle finger almost touched it, but not quite. He grunted and pushed but couldn't get close enough. Finally, he stood, dusting himself off. "I can't."

Sera looked around again, this time with an eye toward anything that might help them reach the blade. They had nothing. She glanced across the hallway at Abi, who looked completely defeated, resting his turbaned head against the bars.

*His turban!*

"Abi!" she said. "How long is your turban?"

Abi lifted his head. "Several cubits. Why?"

"If we stretch it between us, and then drag it along the floor, we might be able to snag the knife and pull it closer."

Abi seemed reluctant at first, but eventually sighed, closed his eyes, and reached up to his turban. He began uncoiling it from his head, a process that took some time and showed how intricate the headpiece was in the first place. Beneath the turban, his dark hair was long, and he wore it braided.

"I'll try to do better this time." He held one end of the fabric in one hand, and bunched up the rest of it in the other. He tossed the bunched end toward Sera, and it unraveled through the air toward her, landing safely within reach. They lowered it to the ground, pulled it tight between their cells, and held it against the ground over the knife. Then Sera pulled it toward her. The knife didn't move, so she let Abi pull some fabric back and they tried it again. And again.

Finally, the tip of the knife caught in the weave of the fabric, and as Sera pulled, it pivoted the knife to a standing position, the blade pointing up. She pulled some more, and the knife came down.

“I can reach that now,” Riq said.

He dropped to the ground as Abi pulled his turban back and began rewrapping it around his head. Then the sound of a door opening came from down the hallway.

“Hurry!” Dak whispered. “Someone’s coming.”

Riq reached through the bars, the knife just barely within reach of his fingertips. He swiped at the blade.

“Careful,” Abi said. “It’s sharp.”

“I know,” Riq said, grunting.

Sera heard footsteps just around the corner.

“Riq,” she whispered.

“Got it!” He whipped his arm back into the cell, the knife in his hand, just as two guards came into view. The grand vizier wobbled between them.

“So, you three” — he cleared his throat — “*scholars* have come back to join the traitor?”

“I am no traitor,” Abi said. “It is you who have promoted a disastrous course of action with the caliph for your own gain.”

“It’s more than that,” Dak said. “He’s SQ.”

Abi blinked. “What?”

“Yeah,” Riq said. Sera noted he had already hidden the knife out of view. “So is the Market Inspector. They’re working for Hulagu’s general Guo Kan.”

“I see.” Abi’s normally soft expression had become suddenly hard and angry.

The grand vizier sneered. “You see nothing. For all the books in your House of Wisdom, you are not very wise.” He turned toward Sera, Dak, and Riq. “And now give me the device.”

Sera folded her arms.

The vizier raised his voice. “Do not make it necessary for me to kill any of you! Hand over the device!”

Sera looked at Dak and Riq, she looked at Abi, and she couldn’t imagine letting anything happen to any of them when she could do something to prevent it. She reached into her coat and pulled out the Infinity Ring.

The vizier held out his hand. “Give it to me.”

Sera clenched her jaw. She slowly passed the Ring between the bars. The vizier took hold of the other end, and for a moment they played a silent game of tug-of-war before Sera allowed her fingers to relax and let it go.

The vizier tucked the Ring inside his robes. “You will remain locked in here until the House of Wisdom falls. After that, you will be released, and it matters not what you do.”

It wouldn’t matter because they would be stranded in the ancient Middle East. Sera wondered if she’d made a mistake handing the Ring over so easily, but she also knew there wasn’t much else she could have done. She’d bought them some time, at least.

The vizier turned with his guards and marched away. No one said anything. They all seemed to be listening to the fading sounds of footsteps. When it was silent, Dak threw up his hands.

“Well, that’s just great.”

“It’ll be fine,” Sera said. “We’ll just have to find a way to get the Ring back after we save the House of Wisdom.”

“Which we still don’t know how to do,” Riq said.

“Well, the first step is to get out of this cell,” Sera said. “You have the knife?”

“Yeah.” Riq pulled it out. “What are you thinking?”

Sera pointed at the window. “We chip away at the bricks until we can break a few of them free and we climb out.”

“What about Abi?” Dak whispered. “He can’t escape through our window. We can’t just leave him.”

Sera hadn’t thought about that.

“What about picking the lock?” Dak asked.

“Right,” Riq said. “Have you ever picked an ancient Baghdad lock before?”

“No,” Dak said. “But how complicated can it be?”

“Quite complicated,” Abi said from his cell. “But not impossible.”

“Do you know how?” Dak asked.

“I know how the mechanism works,” Abi said. “But we’ll need more than a knife. We also need a pick of some kind.”

Sera had already taken inventory of what they had available in the cell. There was only one thing left, and it made her feel queasy to think about it. She reached into her coat and pulled out the Square. The vizier didn’t know to ask for it, so she’d managed to hang on to it.

She spoke hesitantly. “I could probably take this apart and make something to use.”

“The Square?” Riq’s eyes grew wide. He seemed afraid of something.

Dak nodded. “Why not? We were going to have to go to the future to get a new one, anyway.”

“And I’ll try to put it back together when I’m done.” Sera wasn’t sure why Riq looked so frightened. “It’ll be okay.”

Riq took several deep breaths. “Okay. Okay, do it. The mission is what counts.”

Sera sat down with the Square in her lap. There was a seam between the screen and the metal body. She took the blade of the knife and teased it into the seam, then slipped the knife around the entire edge of the Square, breaking the seal. Then she popped the screen off, splitting the Square open like a clam’s shell.

Dust and debris filled the cracks and hollows inside the device, covering some of the circuitry and the battery. All their adventures until now had apparently been taking their toll, and Sera felt guilty for having neglected the device. The particles that had found their way into the SQuare had come from eight different times in history and almost as many locations from all around the world.

“It really needed to be cleaned, anyway.” Sera inhaled and tried her best to blow the dust away. “I can’t believe I let it go this long. I clean the inside of my phone more often than this.”

“You clean the inside of your phone?” Riq asked.

“Are you kidding?” Dak said. “She cleans the inside of her *calculator*.”

Sera felt her face flushing. “So? What about it?”

“Nothing.” Riq was hiding a smile, Sera could tell.

“For the love of mincemeat,” Sera said, “I can’t help it if I’m the only one who knows about the proper care of electronics. Dust is death, you know.” She blew on the SQuare again. “And I can’t believe this thing is still going.”

“It was made to last the whole mission,” Riq said.

“Not the *whole* mission,” Dak said. “Can we use anything in there?”

Sera scanned the components. Most of it was pretty much what she expected. There were a few surprises in the placement of things, but overall it was a pretty well-made device. She immediately saw some metal brackets that she could pull out. Even if she couldn’t get them back in afterward, the SQuare would work without them, as long as it didn’t get bumped around too badly.

“Yes,” she said. “I think we’re in business.”





## Silk and Locks

DAK WINCED a little as Sera ripped some thin pieces of metal from the Square. But Riq looked like he felt actual physical pain at seeing the device gutted. Sera pressed the two halves back together and slipped them back into her coat. She held out the metal strips.

“Who wants to try?”

Dak laced his fingers and cracked his knuckles. “I’ll give it a shot.”

Sera handed him the knife and the metal pieces. He walked to the door. Abi stood across the way, nodding.

“All right,” the Hystorian said, “there are pins inside you must lift with those picks, and then turn the lock with the knife.”

Dak knelt down. “Okay.” He took the metal pick in one hand, and the knife in the other. “You sure you don’t want to take a crack at yours first?”

“Your fingers are far more nimble than mine. Start by exploring with those picks. Listen to the sounds inside the lock. Feel what’s going on inside it.”

Dak reached his arm around through the bars and slipped the pick inside the keyhole. He poked around, exploring, forming an image in his mind of what the inside of the lock looked like. He thought he could tell where the pins were. He experimented with pushing on them, figuring out how they moved, and when he thought he was ready, he stuck the tip

of the knife in the lock and tried to lift the pins and turn the lock at the same time.

It was not easy.

In fact, it was hard. *Really* hard.

His impatience and frustration got the better of him. The pieces were just so tiny, and he couldn't get them to work right. He jumped to his feet with a growl. "Someone else take a turn."

"You're doing well," Sera said. "You were figuring it out. Keep trying."

Dak frowned. Maybe they should try chipping away at the window like Sera had suggested, after all. Dak walked over to it and looked outside. He noticed that during his lock-picking attempts, the sun had started to rise. The pink dawn light and the blue shadows it cast fell on the clay walls and buildings around them. Within moments, Dak heard what sounded like thunder. But he recognized the noise for what it was.

"The Mongols have started up their siege again," he said. "Day two. Five more to go."

"Then what happens?" Riq asked.

"Well . . ." Dak resisted the urge to point out how useful historical facts could be. He'd been resisting saying a lot of things like that the past few days. He was trying hard to be nice, even though it was really starting to bother him that he didn't know what was going on with Sera and Riq. "After that, Hulagu moved into the city. He set up his own temporary palace. Five days after that, the caliph surrendered, and the Mongols went through the city, destroying everything."

"So we better get this door open," Sera said.

Dak sighed. Some of the frustration he'd been feeling had faded a bit. "Okay, I'll keep trying."

He went back to the lock, and was about to kneel down, when the sounds of footsteps approached again from down the hallway.

“They’re coming back!” Dak backed away from the door, and shoved the knife and pick inside his coat.

Two guards came into view holding some clay bowls. They unlocked the door to Dak, Sera, and Riq’s cell and opened it just wide enough to push the bowls inside, along with a pitcher of water. They did the same with Abi’s cell.

“Food,” one of the guards said, even though that was obvious. They relocked the doors and left.

One bowl had some kind of beans in it. They were mushy and tasteless. The other bowl had some kind of oatmeal or something. There weren’t any utensils, so they just took turns eating with their dirty fingers. It was pretty gross, but Dak was hungry enough that he didn’t care.

After he’d finished eating, he went back to the lock, but still couldn’t get it. He passed the knife and pick off to Riq. “You try. I can’t.”

But Riq couldn’t either. And neither could Sera. After a full day of trying, Dak realized that even if Abi said it was “not impossible” to pick the lock, that didn’t mean it was likely.

“I think we need to go back to busting out the window,” Dak said. “But it’ll take a while, and I don’t know how we’ll do it with the guards dropping in on us.”

“We need to wait and see when they come back,” Riq said. “Once we figure out their pattern, we’ll know when we stand the best chance.”

“That still doesn’t solve the problem of leaving Abi behind,” Sera said.

*Oh, right.* Dak turned to look at the scholar.

Abi shook his head. “Young Hystorians, you must fix the Break. Do not worry about me.”

That didn’t sit well with Dak, but right now, they didn’t seem to have any other options. So they settled in to wait for the guards to return.

While they waited, Sera tried to put the pieces back into the SQuare, but all the lock-picking attempts had apparently taken their toll.

“I can’t get them back in,” Sera said.

“So what does that mean?” Riq’s voice had an edge of panic.

“Maybe nothing,” Sera said. “They were just brackets holding things in place. It will still work. For a while.”

“For a while?” Riq asked.

“Probably for as long as we need it to,” Sera said. “Things are just a little loose inside.”

Dak watched Riq’s reaction, and started trying to put things together. The guy was really worried about the SQuare breaking. But Dak didn’t get that, because they had to go back to get a new one, anyway. But now that Dak thought about it, he realized Riq had been acting weird ever since they’d gotten that message from Brint and Mari. Was Riq worried about going back to the present? Why? The only thing Dak could come up with was that it had something to do with his Remnants.

*Remnants.* It had all started with Aristotle’s Remnants, and it always seemed to come back to Remnants. Even though Dak wished he knew what they were like for Sera, he was mostly grateful he didn’t have Remnants. They didn’t seem to bring anyone anything but pain. And fear.

But having actual parents missing in time was worse. Dak hadn’t yet seen a sign of his parents in this era. He’d been trying really hard not to think about it, but he couldn’t help wonder if that meant something. Maybe Dak, Sera, and Riq had fixed enough Breaks that his parents had gone home. Would they be there in the future when he went back for a new SQuare?

His heart started beating faster at that thought. It filled him with hope, even as the sounds of battle raged on outside.



The guards came back that evening with a second meal that consisted of the same stuff as the first meal. They dropped off the food and water, took away the empty bowls from earlier, and left.

“I don’t think they’ll be back until morning,” Riq said. “Now is probably our best chance if we’re going to try and chip our way out of here.”

He took out the knife and went over to the window. Dak watched as Riq ran the blade along the edges of the mud bricks and scraped at their seams. He tried to drive the knife in between them, putting all his weight behind it.

“They’re harder than they look,” he said. “This is going to take a long time. Too long.” But he went back to it, and soon he’d worked up a sweat, even though the sun had set and the room was getting colder as it got darker.

The third day of siege had come to an end. They were running out of time. Dak’s thoughts went to the unstoppable Mongol army, and facts started bubbling in his head. Normally, each fact just kind of popped and went away, replaced by the next, but right now, one of them was staying around.

The Mongols did something cool with their armor. They wore silk underneath it, against their skin. When an arrow pierced their armor, the arrowhead got caught in the silk, and even if it then pierced the warrior’s skin, the silk made the arrow easy to pull out, and kept the injury cleaner and less deadly.

Dak kept thinking and thinking about this fact. There was something about it that seemed to apply to this situation. He turned his attention from Riq’s attempts to chisel at the window and looked around the cell. He looked at the door. The lock where he’d spent several frustrated hours.

*The lock.*

That was it! Dak almost wanted to jump. “Abi!”

Sera and Riq startled in surprise at his outburst.

“Yes?” Abi said.

“Can I cut off a piece of silk from your turban?” Dak asked.

“I . . . I suppose if it is absolutely necessary.” Abi started unwinding it from his head again. “What do you plan to do?”

“You’ll see,” Dak said.

A few moments later, Abi tossed one end of the thin fabric across the hallway, and Dak used the knife to slice off a couple of inches. Abi pulled the rest back, while Dak took the metal pick that Sera hadn’t been able to put back in the Square. He went to the door, reached around, and laid the piece of silk from Abi’s turban over the keyhole. Then he took the pick, and gently packed the silk into the lock. He remembered the way the inside looked in his head, and he packed the silk all around the pins.

“What are you doing?” Sera asked.

“The silk is quiet,” Dak said. “And slippery. When the guards go to use their key, I think the silk will give enough to let the door unlock, but then it’ll jam up the pins, and keep it from locking again when they close the door. We’ll be able to walk right out of here.”

“Uh, don’t you think the guards will notice the door not staying shut?” Riq asked.

“Not if we do something to keep them from noticing,” Dak said.

“And I’ve got an idea for that, too.”

Dak explained it to them, and they were both quiet. So was Abi.

“Dak?” Sera finally said.

“Yes?”

“I think this might be one of your *good* ideas.”

Dak smiled with a bit of pride. “Let’s hope it works.”

The rest of that night, they rehearsed what they would do when the guards came. Riq tossed the knife and pick to Abi, managing to land

them both right through the bars, and Abi cut some silk and did the same thing with the lock on his door.

The sun came up, and everyone waited without saying much. Then, sometime midmorning, Dak heard the guards coming. He nodded to Riq and Sera. They nodded back.

Moments later, the guards came into view with the same bowls of nasty food. One of them pulled out his key and stuck it into the lock. Dak's heartbeat quickened. He held his breath. The guard tried to turn the key, stopped, and looked down at the lock.

*Was it going to work?*

The guard turned harder, and the lock clicked. He pulled the key out and opened the door the same foot or so they always did to slide the bowls of food in and out.

Dak readied himself, and hoped Riq was doing the same.

Then, right as the guard went to close the door, Dak launched himself at it.



## Jailbreak

“No!” DAK screamed. “Let me out! You can’t keep me here!”

Riq rushed the door, too, ready to play his part. The guard reacted to Dak’s charge by slamming the door shut hard just as Dak crashed against it. Dak and Riq grabbed the bars at the same time, and while Dak made a show of tugging hard on them, Riq used his strength to keep the door from opening. Assuming the door would open.

The guards stepped away from Dak’s thrashing at the door. “Back off!” one of them shouted.

Dak stopped pulling and glared at them.

“Back off,” the guard said again.

Dak stepped away from the door.

“You want to eat,” the guard said, “you won’t ever try anything like that again. Understand?”

“I understand,” Dak said.

The guards turned to Abi. They unlocked his cell, and as they went to close it again, he performed a variation of what Dak had done, though not quite as extreme. The guards did not look pleased.

“You, too, traitor?” one of them said. “Just for that, no food for any of you tonight! This is all you get until tomorrow.”

“You can’t do that!” Sera shouted.



“No?” The guard looked at her. “I guess you’ll find out when you go to sleep hungry tonight.”

Sera let out a little whimper that Riq would have believed completely if he didn’t know her better. Sera just wasn’t the whimpering type.

The guards gave them all one last glare and stalked away. Everyone waited until they were long gone, the hallways completely silent, before they approached the door.

“Moment of truth,” Riq said. He had to admit, if this worked, it would be one of Dak’s finest moments. So he decided to let the kid have it. “Why don’t you try the door?”

Dak took a deep breath and stepped forward. He grabbed the bars and gave a gentle tug. Nothing happened. Dak closed his eyes and pulled again, harder, and the door popped open. Riq stared at it, not quite sure he could believe what he was seeing.

“You did it!” Sera actually giggled.

Dak smirked in that cocky way that Riq had found so annoying from day one. “Of course I did.”

That changed Riq’s mind about the compliment he had been about to give. He turned to Abi. “Did it work for your door?”

Abi pulled on the bars, and his door also popped open. “Yes,” the Hystorian said with a smile.

The four of them left their cells and looked down the hallway. Riq had no idea where the guards were, but he was pretty sure he remembered how to get from their cells back to the front door.

“Follow me,” he said. “Quietly.”

He led them down the hallway and around a couple of turns, each time listening carefully before peering around the corner. The place was deserted. The guards weren’t anywhere to be seen.

“Looks like nobody comes here,” Riq said. “I bet the vizier picked this place so we wouldn’t be discovered. The guards don’t even seem to stick around except to bring us our food.”

“I hope they left the front door open,” Dak said.

It turned out that they had. The front door didn’t even lock.

“Okay,” Riq said. “Before we go out there, what’s the plan?”

“In three days Hulagu will be inside the city walls,” Dak said. “I say we try to meet him there and do what we were going to do in the war camp. What we’ve been trying to do from the beginning. We convince him to spare the House of Wisdom.”

“What about the Infinity Ring?” Sera asked.

Riq considered what to do. Guo Kan had said the vizier worked for him. That meant the vizier was probably going to turn the Ring over to the general the first chance he got. Once the general got ahold of it, Riq was pretty sure the Ring would disappear for good. So they had to get it back before Hulagu and Guo Kan entered the city.

“I think we need to split up,” Riq said. “Two of us try to get to Hulagu, while the other two go after the Ring. We meet back at the House of Wisdom.”

“Okay,” Dak said. “Who goes where?”

“I’ll go after the Ring,” Riq said. He felt like he had to be the one to do it, to prove to himself that he was still committed to the mission, in spite of the potential cost.

“It will be in the palace with the vizier,” Abi said. “I know my way around, so I will go with you.”

“That means Dak and I will get into position so that we’ll be able to reach Hulagu,” Sera said. “Right. We can totally do this.”

Riq grasped the handle on the door. “Ready?”

Everyone nodded at him.

He opened the door and peered outside. There wasn’t anyone around. “Coast is clear,” he said. “Good luck, everyone.”

He opened the door wider and stepped out into the sunlight, the sounds of the Mongol assault much louder now than they had been in

their cell. The crash and boom of the artillery echoed across the city. So did the battle shrieks of their warriors.

Riq and Abi turned toward the palace, while Dak and Sera turned the other direction to head into the city. Riq glanced back at them as they set off, heading toward the danger and destruction.



Just outside the palace, Abi stopped. “I do not know what we will face inside. The caliph may still deny the danger, or he may have surrounded himself with his guards.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Riq said.

Together, they entered the garden they had seen on their first trip to the palace. The beauty and tranquility of the place felt really weird now when Riq thought about the destruction taking place not too far away. It was like the caliph lived in his own little bubble. He could look at his flowers and pretend that everything was okay.

After that, they passed into the menagerie. But something wasn’t quite right. Many of the animals were gone. Or at least, not in their cages. And some of the cages were open.

“It looks as though the animal keepers have fled,” Abi whispered.

“So where are the animals?” Riq asked.

“Probably wherever they would feel safer than in a cage.” Abi looked around them. At the trees. At the bushes. The tall grass.

Riq imagined eyes peering at him from all directions, and felt a tingling sensation crawl up his neck. He shook his head. He had to be imagining it. And yet . . .

They proceeded slowly, eyes on the vegetation. There had been tigers in here. Lions. As they reached the far side of the menagerie, they heard a blowing sound ahead of them. Something shook the bushes. Riq and Abi stopped in the path, and both held perfectly still as a black bear lumbered into view.

It looked at them, lifting its nose into the air, nostrils flaring. Then its ears went back flat against its head, and the blowing sound it made got louder. Its teeth clacked together as it swung its head low, back and forth.

“What do we do?” Riq whispered without taking his eyes off it.

“I don’t know,” Abi said. “It is blocking our exit.”

Riq let his gaze leave the bear a moment to look for another way out. He noticed a second-story balcony running the length of one of the menagerie’s walls. If they could somehow get up there, they could escape. Riq looked closer, and noticed a tree growing up against the wall that appeared to come within reach of the balcony.

“Abi,” he whispered. “What if we climb that tree?”

Abi’s eyes widened. “I have never in my life climbed a tree.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Riq said. “I think I remember somewhere that you’re not supposed to turn your back on a bear.”

“Rather like the caliph,” Abi said, managing a smile.

“Right. So let’s back away from the caliph’s bear toward that tree.”

“Lead the way,” Abi said.

Riq slid one foot backward, then the other, inching away from the bear. Abi followed. The bear watched them without moving, still blowing and clacking. As the distance grew between the animal and them, Riq took larger and larger steps, gaining confidence. But that feeling was short-lived as the bear decided to lope toward them a few paces.

“Stay calm,” Abi said. “It is not charging us.”

“Don’t make eye contact.” That was something else Riq remembered from somewhere. Probably a nature show he’d watched with his grandma. “They perceive it as a challenge.”

“Also like the caliph,” Abi said, but without the smile.

A few steps later, Riq reached the tree. He didn’t know what kind it was, but it had branches low enough to reach, and that was all that mattered.

“Abi,” he said. “You go up first.”

“No,” he said. “You go. I may need you to pull me up.”

Riq hesitated, but decided that if this was Abi’s first time climbing a tree, it would be easier to pull him than push him. He reached up to the nearest branch, still facing the bear as fully as he could. The bark felt smooth in his hands.

“Here I go.” In one smooth motion, Riq turned, kicked against the trunk, and pulled himself up onto the branch. He swung one of his legs over it and sat upright, feet dangling to either side. Then he lifted his knees, one at a time, and got his feet under him. He braced himself against the trunk. “Okay, Abi. I can help you now.”

Abi darted a look up at him. Then the Hystorian stretched his hands toward the branch, only barely managing to reach it. Through the leaves, Riq watched the bear getting closer, ears still back, head still swinging.

“Use the trunk like I did,” Riq said.

Abi adjusted his grip on the branch, and then kicked at the trunk, but his shoes just scraped it, and he ended up doing a little bicycle pedal in the air, hanging from the branch. The bear circled around the tree, watching him.

“Try again,” Riq said. “Kick higher.”

Abi made another leap, and this time it worked. He managed to get his chest up onto the branch, his elbows hanging over it, the rest of him dangling. His face was red, his cheeks puffing with his heavy breathing.

Riq bent down and grabbed his robes. “Don’t let go. Try to lift your leg up so I can grab it.”

Abi grunted and swung his leg. Riq bent down and snatched for it, but couldn’t reach it.

“Higher,” he said. The bear came closer. “Higher, Abi.”

The Hystorian let out a low rumble that turned to a growl, then a roar as he closed his eyes and heaved his leg up. Riq managed to snag Abi’s

pants, and after that it was easy enough to pull his leg up over the branch and help him stand up.

They both looked down at the bear. It circled around the base of the tree, sniffing, and then it stood up on its hind legs, front claws raking the trunk.

“Oh,” Riq said with a sinking feeling. “That’s right. Bears climb trees.”



## The Grand Vizier

RIQ PERCHED on the branch, which was now bouncing and creaking under his and Abi's combined weight. The black bear below them had dug its claws into the bark of the tree, and had started climbing after them.

"You are right," Abi said. "They *do* climb trees."

"Let's go!" Riq reached for the next branch and climbed higher.

It was easier now, because they could use the other branches like steps on a ladder. Abi was able to keep up on his own, but he was already out of breath. The bear, on the other hand, did not seem to be slowing down at all.

Riq made it to the branch closest to the balcony's wooden railing. He reached out with one of his hands while holding on to the tree with the other, and grabbed it. Then he pushed off of the tree and pulled himself across the space between them, his toes landing right on the ledge. After that, it was easy to climb over the railing. He just didn't know if it would be easy for Abi.

He turned back to the Hystorian and reached out his hand. "Hurry! The bear is —"

"Thank you." Abi's knuckles were white as he inched along the branch toward Riq. "But I am trying very hard not to think about what the bear is doing or wants to do."

“Right,” Riq said. “Sorry.” But the bear was getting really close. And those claws looked long and mean.

“All right,” Abi said. “I think I am ready.”

“I’m here.” Riq reached out farther.

Abi stretched and grasped Riq’s hand like they were about to arm wrestle. It was a bit sweaty, and Riq hoped he could hold on.

“On your count,” Riq said.

The bear was only one branch below Abi now.

Abi nodded and exhaled. “All right. On three. One. Two. THREE!”

Abi jumped toward the balcony. Riq yanked on his arm, and the Hystorian crossed the gap, landing on the ledge. But a second later, his toes slipped.

“Abi!” Riq still held on to him, and it felt like something tore in his shoulder as the Hystorian’s weight almost pulled him over the railing. Riq cried out as searing pain shot up and down his arm. But he refused to let go. He would not let go.

“Come on.” Riq spoke through gritted teeth. “You gotta help me here.”

The Hystorian dangled as the bear reached the tree branch where they had just been. It beat the branch with its paw, sending little chips of wood flying. Could it make the jump?

Riq’s grip began to fail. “Abi, come on, man.”

“I . . . am trying,” the Hystorian said. “I just . . . need to . . . grab the railing.”

Riq braced himself for the pain, propped one foot against the railing, and pushed backward, lifting Abi a little bit higher. The pain in his shoulder got so bad he worried he might black out.

“There!” Abi got his other hand on to the railing. With Riq still pulling, he heaved himself over the railing, bent at the waist. From there, he simply tumbled onto the balcony, and Riq went down with him. He



fell onto his back, and lay there for a moment. The pain had eased up in his shoulder a bit, but it flared again as soon as he tried to move it.

“The bear does not seem inclined to make the jump,” Abi said.

Riq looked up, grimacing. The Hystorian was right. The bear had stayed where it was, just watching them. They’d escaped. He dropped his head back down.

“You are injured,” Abi said.

“My shoulder,” Riq said.

“May I?” Abi knelt down beside him and gently felt Riq’s entire side, his arm, and then his shoulder.

Riq winced.

“It is dislocated,” Abi said. “But I can put it back.”

“Do it,” Riq said.

“It will hurt,” Abi said. “But then it will feel better.”

Riq lifted up his good arm and bit down hard on the sleeve of his coat. He closed his eyes, and he nodded.

Abi took Riq’s arm in a very firm grip, and then knelt on Riq’s shoulder. The pain burst white-hot, blinding. Riq felt like his whole side was twisting up in a spasm, then he felt a popping. And then the pain was gone. Abi released him.

“There,” he said.

“Th —” Riq’s voice came out a croak. “Thank you.”

“No,” Abi said. “Thank you. You didn’t let me go.”

Riq sat up, blinking, testing his shoulder. It was still incredibly tender, but he no longer felt the same stabbing pain. He staggered to his feet.

“Right,” he said. “Now, let’s go find the vizier.”



Abi led them from room to room, each time scouting a bit ahead for any sign of the palace guards. So far, they hadn’t seen anyone else. The

place seemed deserted.

“I don’t get it,” Riq said. “Where is everybody?”

“I don’t know,” Abi said. “But the vizier will be with the caliph. The SQ is too close to victory to let him out of their sight now. They won’t risk anything going wrong.”

“So where is the caliph?” Riq asked.

Abi smiled, as if a realization had dawned on him. “Like the bear, he will go where he feels safe. Follow me.”

The Hystorian moved forward without any hesitation, and Riq fell in step with him. They took a few turns, and ended up in a familiar place, just a room away from the garden where they had met the caliph the first time.

“Are you serious?” Riq said. “He’s here? When the Mongols are about to take the city?”

Abi nodded. “He’ll have everyone in there with him. His family. His guards. But like the bear, he feels threatened and may charge.”

“So how do we get to the vizier?”

Abi’s wide smile returned. “We get the vizier to come to us. Just follow my lead.”

He lifted his head high and strode ahead. Riq did the same, and they entered the garden.

It looked just as it had days earlier, except more armed guards blocked their way. Lots more. They formed a wall around the caliph’s tent in the middle of the garden. As Riq stood there, a frightened-looking servant dashed up and spritzed him with that same rose water from before. Riq couldn’t believe it. This whole thing seemed insane.

“What is the meaning of —” The vizier trundled toward them from inside the ring of guards, but stopped short when he saw them. “How did — ?”

“The SQ is not the only organization with spies and allies,” Abi said. “Our forces are here, too. Some, even in this very garden.”

The vizier's mouth opened, and he glanced over both shoulders.

"I just wanted to give you fair warning," Abi said. "We're coming for you."

Abi turned around and walked away. Riq watched the vizier's reaction turn from fear to anger. The SQ agent actually began to tremble.

"Come!" Abi called to Riq, and Riq followed after the Hystorian. "Walk calmly," Abi whispered. "But be ready to run. In a moment, the vizier will recover from the surprise."

A moment later, they heard the vizier shout behind them, "SEIZE THOSE TWO!"

"Now we run," Abi said.

They sprinted forward, racing through the palace. Riq got completely disoriented, but Abi seemed to know exactly where he was going, so Riq just stuck closely to him. A backward glance revealed four guards and the vizier charging after them.

"Do you have a plan?" Riq asked, panting hard.

"I am making one," Abi said. "For now, keep running."

Riq decided he better start thinking about a plan of his own. There was no way they could handle four guards and the vizier, just the two of them.

They rounded a corner and skidded to a halt. It was a dead end. Abi frowned at the wall as if it were simply a fact he disagreed with. "This should not be here."

"It's here," Riq said. "Let's go." They ran back, retracing their footsteps, and entered into a long, narrow room, coming face-to-face with the vizier and his guards.

"If you have so many behind you" — the vizier wheezed as he spoke — "then why do you run?" He turned to the guards. "Take them."

But just then, something growled behind the guards, low and menacing. They all turned to look at the same time, and between them, Riq saw a tiger. It was huge. Twice as big as the bear had been. Its whole

face lifted in a snarl, exposing its fangs, and it held its body low to the ground, stalking forward, ready to pounce.

“RUN!” one of the guards shouted, and the four of them flew right past Riq and Abi, almost knocking them down.

The vizier stood paralyzed. The tiger roared, sounding as loud to Riq as an entire Mongol army.

“We should run, too,” Abi said, and Riq agreed.

They shot down a different hallway than the guards had gone, and heard the vizier behind them. “Wait for me!”

A few yards ahead, they came to a staircase. Riq took it four steps at a time, and they came up onto another balcony. This one was narrow, with no railing, and overlooked a small courtyard. The frightened screams of the vizier and the roaring of the tiger echoed behind them. Riq looked around, and noticed a tapestry hanging from the wall. It gave him an idea, and he ripped it down.

“Take the other end!” he said to Abi.

Together, they stretched it across the door. Riq heard footsteps on the stairs.

“When they hit it, you let go,” Riq said.

Abi shifted on his feet and nodded.

Riq was pretty sure this was going to hurt his shoulder like nothing else.

The vizier’s footsteps and screaming reached the top of the staircase, and the tapestry exploded outward. Abi let go of his end, and the vizier careened forward, arms pinwheeling, to the very edge of the balcony. The tiger leapt out of the stairwell right behind him, seemed to notice the ledge, and slipped on its feet. But the momentum of its weight carried it along the floor. It scrambled, paws and claws splayed, but went over the side with a roar.

The vizier, still teetering, grabbed the tapestry as he fell, and Riq cried out at the pain in his shoulder. But it wasn’t as bad as before. It

wasn't dislocated.

The vizier clung to the tapestry as the beast, which had apparently landed just fine, paced around the courtyard below.

"I'm telling you right now!" Riq shouted down to the vizier. "I've been lifting Abi all day, and I can't hold you forever!"

"Please!" the vizier shouted. "Don't drop me!"

"Where is the device you took from us?" Riq asked.

"I have it! It is here!"

"Hand it up!" Riq said.

"Are you mad?" The vizier's voice completely broke. "I would have to let go!"

"Only with one hand!" Riq said.

The vizier let out a pathetic sob. "I can't."

The muscles in Riq's arms started to quiver. He had been telling the truth: He couldn't hold on much longer. But he wasn't really planning to feed the guy to the tiger either. He just hoped the vizier would give in before Riq had to pull him up.

The tiger roared again below them, eyeing the vizier's dangling feet. The animal actually made a leap for him, but missed, and the vizier screamed.

"He might jump higher next time!" Riq shouted.

"All right!" the vizier shrieked. He let go of the tapestry with one hand, hanging by the other, reached into his robes, and pulled out the Ring. Riq nodded to Abi, and the Hystorian came forward, reached down, and took the Ring from the vizier's hand. As soon as the vizier had let go of the device, he clamped both hands back on the tapestry.

"Thank you!" Riq said. He looked at Abi. "Help me lift him up."

Together, they hauled the tapestry onto the balcony, along with the very frightened vizier. The man kissed the ground and then stood up. Riq watched him, wary.

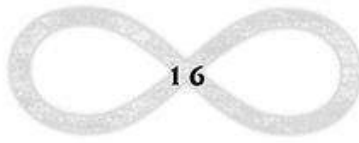
“It would seem the Hystorians have some scruples,” the vizier said. “I, on the other hand, do not.”

He lunged for the Ring, still in Abi’s hands, and the two of them fought over it along the narrow balcony. Riq panicked. Damaging the Square was one thing, but they could *not* break the Ring. He jumped into the tug-of-war, and worked on loosening the vizier’s hands.

The man wrenched and pulled, and Riq pried the vizier’s fingers away one at a time, until the last came free. When that happened, the vizier stumbled backward, and this time, there wasn’t a tapestry to hold on to. Riq watched, helpless, as the man fell wide-eyed over the ledge. Screams and roaring followed, but Riq tried not to listen, and he definitely didn’t want to look.

He and Abi left the balcony and descended the staircase. Neither of them spoke as they made their way back through the palace, toward the House of Wisdom.

He had completed his part of the mission, and gotten the Infinity Ring back. He only hoped Sera and Dak were okay. The Break now rested on them.



## Farid

SERA HAD no idea how they were supposed to do this. It wasn't hard to know where they needed to go. The sounds of the battle waging at the wall gave them the direction. But once the Mongols breached the city, how would Dak and Sera get close to Hulagu? Especially with Guo Kan there. They needed some kind of disguise.

"Hulagu had epilepsy," Dak said.

"*Hmm.*" Sometimes, Sera found it hard to fake interest in Dak's random trivia. "I don't really see how that fact is particularly useful right now."

"It might be," Dak said. "One of my facts just got us out of that prison cell."

Sera didn't have the energy to argue with him. "Fine, Dak. Fine."

They walked down empty streets that had been completely choked with people and camels only a few days before. It seemed like everyone had either fled the city or were hiding inside their houses.

"What's been bothering you?" Dak asked.

"What do you mean?" Sera asked.

"Come on, dude. You know what I mean."

They'd been friends forever. Of course Dak would know that something was wrong. A heaviness fell over Sera and she took a deep breath. "Okay."

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, I’ll tell you.” She stopped in the street and turned to face him. “But this is a secret between you and me, understand?”

“What level of security clearance?” He chuckled. “Remember? Like when we used to —”

“I’m serious, Dak.”

He tipped his head downward, looking at the ground. “Sorry. Okay.” Then he looked back up, his smile gone. “What is it?”

Sera paused another moment to make sure he wasn’t about to crack another joke. “I saw the Cataclysm during a warp.”

Dak’s eyebrows lifted. “What do you mean? Like, you *saw* it, saw it?”

“Yes, it was real.” Sera closed her eyes, trying to push away the images rising up in her memory. “I was there.”

“How?”

“It was when I warped away with Ilsa. I hadn’t meant to, but I went to the future.”

“Wow.” Dak shook his head. “I don’t know what to say. That’s . . . big. Why didn’t you say anything until now?”

“Because it was bad. Really, really bad. We may have fixed a bunch of Breaks, but the world is still going to be destroyed. As much as we’ve managed to get right, it isn’t nearly enough. I guess I just didn’t want to burden you guys with that.”

Dak nodded, frowning a little. “But there’s something else, isn’t there?”

Sera ran her fingers through her hair. “Yes. There’s something else.” She felt her throat tightening just thinking about what she was going to say. Saying it made it real. But she wasn’t going to cry. No tears. “I saw my parents.”

“Your . . . they’re alive?”

“Yes,” Sera said. *No tears*. “No. They died in the Cataclysm.”



“I don’t understand.”

“I think something we did saved them, one of the Breaks we fixed. But it’s not enough. If I want to *really* save them, I have to stop the Cataclysm.”

“You mean *we* have to stop the Cataclysm,” Dak said. “We’re in this together.”

Sera inhaled sharply. “I know.”

Dak smiled at her, and for a moment it felt like they were back home in their tree. Back before they knew anything about Hystorians or Breaks. Back before all of this started.

“Hey!” he said. “I just thought of something. Your parents might be there in the present. Right now. That means you might get to see them when we go back to get a new SQuare!”

That did it. Sera couldn’t stop the tears after that. She cried, and Dak apologized, but it wasn’t his fault. Sera had already had that same thought many, many times. It made her so happy she almost couldn’t stand it. It was too much. Dak put his arms around her and pulled her into a tight hug that lasted a couple of moments, just the right amount of time, before he let her go.

“We’re going to save them,” he said. “And we’re going to save my parents, too. We’re going to save the whole world.”

Sera cleared her throat and wiped the tears from her cheeks on her sleeve. “Right. That’s what we’re going to do. So let’s do it.”

Dak looked around. “I think the Persian Tower is that way.” He pointed down the road. “That’s where Hulagu will come into the city.”

“Then that’s where we should go,” Sera said.

They set off down the street, the sounds of the battle echoing around them, sounding closer to Sera with every step. They did pass other people occasionally in the street, but the strangers avoided them and hurried by.

A short while later, they came to an intersection towered over by another of the large archways. As they drew closer to it, they saw a man pacing back and forth beneath it, and they soon recognized him. It was Farid, the rug merchant who'd helped them escape the Market Inspector.

When he saw them, he lifted his hands toward them. "Little *pirashki*! Is it you?"

"It's us, Farid," Sera said. "What are you — ?"

"Oh, I had almost given up hope! The man and the woman said you would come, but then you didn't come, and I began to doubt my memory of their instructions. I feared I had been waiting in the wrong place!"

"A man and woman?" A chill raced down Dak's back.

"Yes," Farid said. "Two days ago they came to me and gave me ten whole dinar — ten! — and told me to wait here for you. They said you would be coming this way, and I was to give you shelter."

Sera gasped. "Dak, your parents."

"I know," Dak said. "They were here."

"So come, little *pirashki*, come." Farid led them away from the archway. "We will go somewhere safe to wait until this is all over."

But they didn't have time. They couldn't wait until it was over. "Farid," Sera said, "we appreciate —"

"Your concern for us," Dak said, butting in. He leaned in close to Sera and whispered, "We have to trust my parents. Okay?"

Sera thought about it and agreed. Of course they had to trust Dak's parents. So they followed Farid down several streets that twisted and turned, narrowed and widened, until they came to a modest-looking building.

"My home," he said. He unlocked the door and ushered them inside.

The room was dim, but Sera's eyes quickly adjusted. They were in a kind of entryway, and Farid led them across it to another door, which opened onto a small, square courtyard. Plants grew in large pots in all the corners, and each of the four walls had a doorway. Staircases climbed up

the walls to doorways on the second story. For as many rooms as the home had, it seemed to Sera that there should be more people there.

“Do you have a family, Farid?” Sera asked.

He nodded, noticeably calmer since they had gotten off the street. “Yes, I do. But I sent them away from the city the moment I learned the Mongols were coming.”

“Why didn’t you leave with them?” Dak asked.

“I could not leave my home or my rugs,” Farid said. “Besides, I’m sure the city will survive. The caliph knows best, and Baghdad’s walls are strong. The Mongols will give up this siege and move on.”

“Um,” Dak said. “We sure hope so. But it might be smart to prepare for the worst, just in case.”

“I am prepared. I have food and water to last me. Are you hungry?”

Actually, Sera was feeling pretty hungry after a few days of eating nothing but the food they’d been given in their prison cell. “Yes, I think we’re both hungry.”

“What would you like?” Farid asked. “Nothing is cooked, but I have breads, olives, fruit, cheeses —”

“Cheeses?” The excitement in Dak’s voice made Sera smile.

“Yes,” Farid said. “Come, we will eat, and then you will rest.”



Farid’s food was delicious, and his hospitality and friendliness put Sera at ease. She was almost able to forget they were basically sitting in the middle of a war zone. Sera didn’t know what she and Dak were supposed to be doing there, or how long they should stay, but she decided to wait a little while to see what developed.

Dak had no trouble settling in. Aside from the cheeses, Sera thought being here probably made him feel closer to his parents, because he was where they had wanted him to be.

As dusk arrived, and Farid lit a few oil lamps, Sera decided that she and Dak should at least spend the night. If their purpose in being here wasn't obvious by the next day, they could leave and get back to figuring out how to fix the Break on their own.

She fell asleep easily in the comfortable bed Farid prepared for her and woke up the next day after a deep and restful sleep. She'd even slept through the sounds of the Mongol assault.

"This is the fifth day," Dak said next to her.

That meant in two more days, Hulagu would be there.

"What should we do?" Dak asked.

"I don't know," Sera said. "Last night I thought we should leave today." But lying there in her comfortable bed, and already looking forward to breakfast, Sera had second thoughts. "We can't talk to Hulagu until he's in the city. There's no way we can get to him now."

"So you think we should wait?" Dak asked.

"It seems like that's what your parents wanted us to do."

"I was thinking the same thing."

Sera let her eyes close again. "Then let's wait."



That day and the next came and went. Sera and Dak ate. They slept. Farid told them wonderful stories to try to distract them, and they played chess. But the whole time Sera worried about Riq, and with the distant sounds of the Mongol army, she never felt at ease.

On the morning of the seventh day of the siege, Sera woke up feeling especially anxious. This was the day Hulagu would take the Persian Tower and move into the city. Sera and Dak still had to find a way to get to him. It was time for them to leave.

"Wake up, Dak." She shook him.

His eyes stayed closed. "No."

"Dak, we need to get going."

“Why?”

“We have a Break to fix.”

“I think we should stay here until we know what my parents wanted us to do,” Dak said.

“But we don’t know how long that will take,” Sera said. “And besides, your parents aren’t thinking about the Breaks. They’re thinking about you, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

“I know, but —”

A pounding on the front door echoed through the whole house, followed by the sound of a man’s voice shouting. “Farid! Rug Merchant!”

Sera and Dak got to their feet and walked out of their room into the courtyard. Farid was already at the front door. He looked back, and motioned for them to step aside, out of view.

Farid opened the door. “Ah, Market Inspector, what an unexpected honor to have you at my home.”

*Market Inspector?* But he was SQ! How had he found them here? This could not be happening, Sera thought, not after they had finally escaped the grand vizier.

“Spare me your flattery,” the Market Inspector said. “You know why I have come.”



## Little *Pirashki*

DAK TRIED to control the panic rising up inside him. The Market Inspector was here. He had tracked them down. Or had Farid betrayed them? Dak didn't want to believe that, not when his parents were the ones who had made sure he ended up here.

"I apologize," Farid said. "But I do not know why you have come."

"I've come to confiscate your rugs," the Inspector said.

"Confiscate? My rugs? But why?"

"They are needed by Hulagu Khan." The Inspector's voice sounded just as snobby and annoying as Dak remembered it. "He who will shortly breach the city. There is a palace being prepared for him on the eastern side of town, and for this palace we need rugs. Your rugs."

"I am happy to offer my rugs to Hulagu Khan," Farid said. "Give me some time to prepare them."

"We'll be back in one hour," the Market Inspector said. "Have them ready."

The front door shut, and Farid came back into the courtyard. Dak and Sera stepped out from their hiding place.

"That scoundrel!" Farid punched the palm of his hand. "My rugs! For that warlord?"

"Actually . . ." Sera said.

Dak turned to look at her. She had that look in her eyes, the one she got when she was about to solve a great big math problem.

“Do you need a couple of carpet inspectors?” she asked. “One more time?”

Dak saw where she was going. And it was *perfect*.



Before the Market Inspector returned, Farid helped them get rolled up in two carpets and loaded onto a cart with the rest of the rugs going to Hulagu Khan’s new palace. He hitched a donkey up to the cart, and it just so happened that its rear end sat right in front of Dak’s carpet. Like, inches away from his face, and of course, he couldn’t move his face to escape it. What was it with beasts of burden and this Break?

“Are you sure about this, little *pirashki*?” Farid asked. He sounded really nervous to Dak.

“We’re sure, Farid,” Dak said. Maybe he could wiggle his hand up to plug his nose if he needed to. . . .

“Thank you for everything, Farid,” Sera said. “I hope the ten dinar is enough.”

“Ten dinar?” Farid laughed. “That’s a small fortune! But I would have helped you children for nothing. You are good, and the Market Inspector is bad, and I wish I knew why you were doing this.”

“We told you,” Sera said. “And it’s a secret no one else can know.”

“Ah, your story about the djinn and the ring that can move through time?”

“Yes,” Dak said. His story had sounded better when he told it the second time, to Farid. They had been trying to find a way to explain their mission.

“Well, do not be offended,” Farid said, “but a children’s story like that does little to reassure me.”

“Trust us,” Sera said. “We —”

“*Shh*,” Farid said. “The Market Inspector comes.”

They fell silent, and a few moments later, the Market Inspector’s voice came from right beside the cart.

“Well done, Rug Merchant,” he said. “You have made the right decision.”

“Allow me to transport my wares to the great khan’s palace?” Farid asked.

“Certainly,” the Market Inspector said. “I shall accompany you.”

A moment later, the donkey brayed, and the cart lurched forward, tipping and rocking along the road. Dak stayed as motionless and silent as he could. He could almost feel Sera inside her rug next to him. The cart moved slowly, so slowly it began to drive Dak crazy. He didn’t like not being able to see outside. He didn’t like not knowing what was going on.

But after what felt like forever, the cart rocked to a stop, and the Market Inspector cleared his throat.

“Hulagu Khan appreciates your offering, Rug Merchant,” he said. “For it, you shall be spared. You may stay here following the siege, where you will be safe from the pillaging to come.”

“Th-thank you?” Farid said.

That actually made Dak feel good. By helping them, perhaps Farid had helped himself.

“Leave the rugs here,” the Market Inspector said. “I’ll have someone attend to them.”

Uh-oh. That would not be good.

“Uh — that is, I could take care of that,” Farid said. He sounded a little flustered. Was it enough to make the Market Inspector suspicious? “I find pleasure in seeing the places my rugs will be enjoyed, you see.”

The Market Inspector was silent. Dak waited.

“Very well,” the Market Inspector said. “That will save me the trouble. They are intended for Hulagu Khan’s reception hall.”



“Excellent!” Farid clapped his hands. “The more people to see my rugs!”

“Yes, indeed.” The Market Inspector sounded like he had already lost interest in the rugs. “Carry on. I have important work to attend to. But I shall be back to examine them, and if I find any of them to be lacking in quality, I shall be very displeased. I maintain a very high standard in the markets of Baghdad and for the khan.”

“Yes, *muhtasib*,” Farid said.

There was silence for a long time. And then Dak heard Farid sigh. “I’m taking you both straight into the lion’s den,” he said. “I feel like I should ask you to forgive me.”

Over the next little while, Farid loaded the rugs, one by one, into Hulagu’s new palace. That meant there were several periods where he was gone, and Dak and Sera were alone in the cart, hoping no one stopped to examine the rugs. They didn’t dare whisper to each other, even though they wanted to.

Eventually, Farid came back and said, “All right, up we go.” Dak felt him hoist Sera away from him, out of the cart with a grunt. “My, what a heavy rug,” Farid said then, chuckling.

Dak smiled. Then he was alone. Really alone.

He tried to ignore the donkey rear taking up his vision, and pictured instead where they might be. Their surroundings. Maybe they were in the street. Maybe they were in a courtyard. He tried to imagine what was going on. Where his parents might be. Where they had gone after they’d given the dinars to Farid. Were they already ahead of them at the next Break? Dak started wondering what that might be, too. Where would they go, and what would they see? His thoughts felt like a runaway train sometimes. Just completely unstoppable.

He heard footsteps returning, and braced himself to be lifted in the air.

“*Hmph*,” a voice said. “One rug left.”

*Oh, no!* No, this could not be happening! Dak sucked in a breath. It was the Market Inspector!

“You there! Guard!” the Market Inspector shouted. “Come move this rug inside so we can clear this cart from the courtyard. I don’t want it here when Hulagu Khan arrives.”

Where was Farid? Dak began to really panic now.

“Yes, *muhtasib*,” another man said. His footsteps came closer.

*Okay, stay calm.* Dak would just go limp. Become one with the rug. Maybe the guy wouldn’t notice. Maybe he’d just carry him right on inside. Dak relaxed every muscle in his body, down to the tips of his fingers.

He felt hands reach around him, and then a squeezing as the hands lifted him from the cart.

“*Omph!*” the guard said. “Heavy rug!”

“Excellent,” the Market Inspector said. “A heavy rug is a high-quality rug. Farid really did bring his best. Guo Kan will be most pleased. The happier we keep Hulagu, the stronger our position. Take it inside to the audience hall.”

“Yes, *muhtasib*.”

Dak rolled and the world spun, and then he came to rest high up, probably on the guard’s shoulder. As scared as Dak was, and as fast as his heart raced, he kept his body as loose as a noodle, bouncing a little with each of the guard’s steps.

Moments later, Dak heard voices up ahead.

“My — my rug!” That was Farid. “You did not have to bring it to me. I would have unloaded it myself.”

“The Market Inspector asked me.”

“The . . . Market Inspector?”

“Yes, but since you’re here, would you mind taking it?”

“YES!” Farid shouted. “I mean, of course.”

Dak rolled again, downward, and came to rest at a lower spot. He could tell Farid held him now.

“That’s a high-quality rug,” the guard said.

“Th-thank you,” Farid said.

Dak heard the scuff of the guard’s boot as he turned and walked away, the echo of his footsteps receding.

“*Pirashki?*” Farid whispered.

“I’m here,” Dak whispered back.

Farid sighed and carried Dak a little ways before setting him down. “We are alone,” the rug merchant said, and unrolled Dak from the rug.

As it opened up and spit Dak out, he kept rolling a couple of times, his legs and arms flopping. Then, between the stress and his desperate attempt to relax, all he could do was just lie there. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to move again,” he said to himself.

“Well, you’d better.”

He looked up at Sera.

“Hulagu will be here soon.”

Dak struggled to his feet, and for the next little while, they helped Farid lay out the rugs, covering the floor of the audience hall. Dak got a look at his surroundings for the first time. The room was tall, with carved, blue-tiled pillars supporting a vaulted ceiling. High windows let light into the rafters, but left everything below in a soft glow. There were some pieces of wooden furniture along the walls, cabinets and chests. Probably meant to hold the tributes and gifts sure to come Hulagu’s way. At one end of the room stood a raised platform, with an ornate, upholstered seat. Hulagu’s throne. They were definitely in the right place. And almost at the right time.

After that, and with a lot of reassurance, they eventually convinced Farid to leave them alone to wait.

“I almost wish I could have seen it,” Dak said.

“What?” Sera asked.

“The battle at the Persian Tower,” Dak said. “It’s an important moment in history.”

“A *violent* moment in history,” Sera said. “No thank you.”

“Bad things happen,” Dak said. “*Really* bad things happen. I mean, just think about how many wars have been fought here in Baghdad.” He shook his head. “Ancient wars. And modern wars. You’d think we could learn something from that and not keep making the same mistakes.”

“I know bad things happen,” Sera whispered. “But I’ve seen enough wars now to know *exactly* what they’re like, and I don’t want to keep seeing them over and over.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Dak said.

Sera pointed over in a corner. “There’s an empty cabinet over there. I think we can hide inside it until the right time.”

Dak nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”



## Hulagu Khan

SERA AND Dak hunkered close together inside the cabinet, waiting. It was musty smelling, and old. They knew it was only a matter of time now until Hulagu entered the city and took possession of his temporary palace. Only a matter of time until Sera and Dak had to step out and convince him, somehow, to spare the House of Wisdom.

“Listen to that,” Dak said. “The siege has ended.”

Sera cocked her ear. He was right. The sounds of battle had gone, and the city was quiet.

“Won’t be long now,” Dak said. “Hulagu . . .” He shook his head. “Never mind.”

“What?” Sera asked.

“Nothing.” He looked away. “I was just going to annoy you with another historical fact.”

Sera felt a little stab of guilt over the way she’d been treating Dak. Sure, his historical babble annoyed her at times, but it was also something she liked about him, because it was part of what made Dak . . . Dak.

“I’m sorry for the way I’ve been treating you,” she said.

He looked up.

“Riq and I have been kind of ganging up on you. Normally, I’ve always defended you, but I haven’t been a very good best friend lately.”

“That’s okay,” Dak said. “You had the whole seeing your parents and the Cataclysm thing to deal with. It’s fine. We’re good.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course,” Dak said. “And I mean, I know I can be really annoying. I just can’t stop it.”

“You really like history,” Sera said. “And that’s okay. That’s you.”

A few minutes of silence passed. Then Sera asked, “So, what was the fact you were going to tell me?”

“Well” — Dak grinned a little — “it was that —”

But noises outside the cabinet cut him off. The *clomp* of many, many boots, and the din of many voices. It sounded like a wave rushing into the room. It settled all around them, and Sera opened the cabinet just a crack to look out. The room had filled with Mongols, and some people from Baghdad, too. They milled around, talking, waiting. Then, a short while later, they all fell silent at the same moment, and Sera knew that meant Hulagu had entered the room.

Everyone dropped to the ground in a bow, and Sera saw him stride forward with wide, bow-legged steps. He wore flashing, gilded armor, with a jeweled helmet on his head, and a jeweled sword at his waist. Behind him came a train of attendants, including Tusi.

Hulagu climbed to his throne and sat down. The entire room stayed bowed as his imperious gaze swept across them. “You may rise,” he said at last.

What followed appeared to be some kind of ritual, where generals and warriors came forward, and Hulagu praised them for doing something extraordinary on the battlefield. Then they exchanged gifts, and the gifts were almost always clothing of some kind. The fancier the item, the higher the honor, with some hats and coats appearing to be made entirely of gold thread and gemstones. So Hulagu gave gifts to his people, and the people gave gifts to Hulagu.

“What’s going on out there?” Dak asked. He couldn’t see like she could.

She tried to describe what she was seeing, and Dak nodded along, but she could tell he was frustrated.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I just want to know what’s going on,” he said.

Sera smiled. That was very true of Dak. Everywhere they went, he was always trying to figure things out, and usually he did that by relating whatever was going on back to history in some way.

“Okay,” she whispered, willing to try harder for him. “Now there’s a guy giving Hulagu a long coat with a peacock embroidered on it. Lots of silver thread.”

Dak sat back, listening, and this went on for a long time. So long, Sera actually started to get bored, and she yawned.

“This could go on forever,” she said. “What should we do?”

“Keep waiting?”

Sera didn’t want to keep waiting. Everything depended on them getting this right. They’d planned to try to find a time when Hulagu would be alone, but that didn’t seem to be happening anytime soon. Maybe not at all.

“I think we should do it now,” she said.

“Here?” Dak straightened. “In front of everybody?”

“Yes,” Sera said.

Dak rubbed his head with both hands. “Okay. Okay, let’s do it.”

Sera opened the cabinet door, and they slipped out of it. Everyone in the room was facing the khan, so nobody noticed them at first. They managed to glide along the wall, getting closer and closer to the throne.

But then Sera made eye contact with a warrior, and he nudged the guy next to him, and that guy turned to stare. Then he tapped the guy in front of him, and that man shouted.

“You! What are you doing here?”

The attention of the entire room swiveled toward them, and everyone fell silent. Sera thought maybe this was a bad idea, after all. Her stomach sank. Was this how Dak felt when one of his ideas didn't pan out the way he'd hoped?

"What is the meaning of this?" Another man marched toward them with a very hard and menacing gait. "Who let these children in?"

"I don't know, General Guo Kan," the warrior said, bowing. "I just saw them creeping toward the great khan."

So this was the Time Warden. Guo Kan. When he drew near, he recognized Dak immediately. "So, you've come back," he said. "I appreciate prisoners who return to their cells. I see you now have the girl with you but are missing the African. Where is he?"

"Defeating the vizier as we speak," Dak said.

"I doubt that," Guo Kan said. "But you, you have disrupted an important ceremony." His voice fell to a deep growl. "So I will deal with you personally."

"Bring them here!"

Sera, along with everyone in the room, turned toward the throne. Hulagu stood, staring at them. Waiting.

Guo Kan clearly felt torn. He obviously didn't want Sera and Dak anywhere near the khan, but Sera also figured he couldn't disobey Hulagu's order either.

"Yes, my lord," the general said. He grabbed Sera and Dak by the arms, one in each hand, and dragged them forward until they stood before the throne.

Sera dropped to her knees, bowing, and Dak did the same.

"What are you doing here?" Hulagu asked.

"They are spies, great khan," Guo Kan said. "Sent to assassinate you."

"Children?" Hulagu said. "Assassins?"

"I think not," came a calm voice from the side of the throne.



Sera looked up as Tusi stepped forward, his hands clasped behind his back. She was shocked. Was he actually sticking his neck out to help them?

Tusi cleared his throat. “My reading of the stars foretold an unexpected visit to your court, great khan. What are these children if not unexpected? I believe they may be a portent, possibly sent to you for a reason known only to your gods. How you deal with them may have lasting importance to your reign.”

Hulagu looked at Tusi. “I see.”

Tusi *was* helping them! He made eye contact with Sera, his expression unreadable. Angry? Sad? Frightened? He spoke again. “I would like to consult the stars again, great khan. I advise you take no action until I have had the opportunity to study the matter.”

Hulagu returned to his throne. “Very well. Your reading of the heavens has guided me true until this point. I shall put my trust in you again, Tusi.”

Tusi bowed. “I am honored, great khan. May I interview these children in private?”

Guo Kan’s face burned red. “Great khan, I would urge —”

“Yes,” Hulagu said. “You may interview them in private.”

Tusi looked at the general, who released Sera and Dak as roughly as he had grabbed them.

“With your leave, great khan,” Tusi said, “I will take them now.”

“Yes, yes,” Hulagu said. “Go.”

Tusi bowed. He motioned for Sera and Dak to bow, which they did, and then they left the audience hall through a little side door. Tusi led them into an adjacent room, and after he had shut the door, he spun on them with rage that seemed barely controlled.

“Do you know what you have done?” he asked.

Sera felt herself withering, but recovered quickly. They had done nothing wrong. In fact, they were doing the exact right thing. It was Tusi

who had made the wrong choices.

“We’re doing what we have to,” Sera said, “to save the House of Wisdom.”

Tusi groaned. “What madness is this? Forget the House of Wisdom! There is nothing you can do! But now you’ve come here and put your lives in danger, and I foolishly stepped out to defend you, putting my life in danger as well!”

“We didn’t mean to put your life in danger,” Sera said.

“Yeah,” Dak said. “What’s your problem? We didn’t ask for your help.”

“The general would have made swift work of you if I had not intervened, believe me. He was not pleased with your previous escape.”

Dak smirked. “No?”

“No. He executed the warriors who failed to guard you.”

“Oh.” Dak’s smile crumbled.

“But that is not your fault,” Tusi said. “You simply have no idea the nature of the men you deal with. Guo Kan is merciless. And Hulagu does not see the world the way you do. You cannot reason with him.”

“But you can!” Sera said. “You could do something!”

Tusi made a fist and pressed it against his forehead. “I cannot. It is not my responsibility.”

“You’re only thinking of yourself,” Sera said. “What about your responsibility to science? To knowledge? Those matter to the entire world! Don’t you care about that?”

Tusi brought his hand down. “Of course I do.” His voice softened. “Since you came to me at the war camp, I have not had a single restful night. My doubts keep me awake. I have spent many hours wondering how I could convince the khan to keep his men out of the libraries, to spare them. But there is nothing I can say that will convince him.”

“I can think of something,” Dak said.

Sera turned toward him. So did Tusi.

“Hulagu obviously puts a lot of trust in the stars, right? So what do you need to study the stars?”

“Celestial globes,” Tusi said. “Charts, tables.”

“Right,” Dak said. “But what you *really* need is an observatory. And what does an observatory need?”

Sera saw where Dak was going. And it was brilliant.

Tusi saw it, too. Sera could tell because a smile broke unevenly across his face. “A library,” he whispered.

“Right,” Dak said. “You just need some books. And I happen to know a place where you can find *lots* of them.”



## A Dangerous Proposal

DAK WAS on a roll. First he'd busted them all out of that prison, and now he'd managed to convince Tusi to help them, and even given him the way to do it. Now Dak and Sera just had to sit back and let Tusi do his thing and convince Hulagu to build him an observatory, stocked with books from Baghdad.

"We'll wait until the morning to approach the throne," Tusi said. "I will . . . consult the stars. But I already have a fairly good idea of what they will tell me."

"I bet that's usually the way you work," Dak said.

Tusi shrugged. "I am far more interested in predicting the motion of the stars than predicting events from those motions. The former is science, while the latter is nothing more than seeing what we want to see. Now you should both get some rest."

Dak had to admit he was pretty tired. So he and Sera nestled down on some cushions Tusi had a servant bring into the room. These Baghdad beds were growing on him. Who needed a mattress?

Dak closed his eyes, and before long, he nodded off.



Shouting startled him awake. He jumped up, only to feel someone grab him from behind in a bear hug, pinning his arms at his sides.

“Let me go!” he roared, squirming, but it was no use. He was trapped.

Dak looked to his side, and saw that another man had Sera. General Guo Kan stood nearby.

Tusi shook his fist at him. “You dare disobey the great khan!”

“I’ve had enough of your meddling, Tusi,” Guo Kan said. “You may have Hulagu deceived by your superstitious pandering, but you and I both know you’re a far more intelligent man than that. But you’re also a survivor, and I actually respect that.”

“Your respect means nothing to me,” Tusi said. “And you know something of superstition yourself, don’t you, Divine Man?” Dak heard sarcasm all over the way Tusi said the name.

“We both play our parts,” Guo Kan said. “Go back to playing yours, as you do so well, and you might manage to survive once more. Leave the children to me.”

“I can’t do that,” Tusi said. “They’re children.”

“And they are more dangerous than you realize.” Guo Kan fixed Dak with that same cold stare. “You were right in that, Tusi, even though you don’t understand why.”

“You will release them now,” Tusi said. “And we will take this matter up before the khan.”

“Why?” Guo Kan said. “So you can feed him one of your celestial readings?”

Dak tried once more to break free, but the Mongol who had him was strong. It didn’t even work to kick or stomp the guy’s feet. How was it that just hours ago, they’d seemed so close to victory, but now they perched at the edge of losing it all?

Dak looked at Sera. She was crying, and he knew why. Losing it all meant something more to her. He had to do something. For her.

Guo Kan was trying to get away with something without Hulagu’s knowledge. So Dak had to get the khan’s attention. He only hoped the

warlord was close by.

Dak sucked in a deep breath. "GREAT HULAGU KHAN!" His shout echoed in the small room, as loud as he could make it. "GREAT HULAGU KHAN!"

"Silence him!" Guo Kan hissed.

The guard holding Dak tried to cover his mouth, but Dak just bit his hand and got one more shout off.

"GREAT HULAGU KHAN!"

And then Sera took up the cry, too, screaming in her higher-pitched voice. "HULAGU! GREAT HULAGU KHAN!"

Guo Kan's face twisted up with rage, and he pulled his sword free of its scabbard. Dak gulped. He didn't think the general would actually kill them right here. But then again, he might.

Tusi took a step backward and laughed out loud. Then he, too, shouted. "MY KHAN! YOUR PEOPLE NEED YOU, GREAT KHAN!"

Guo Kan spun on him. "Now you've gone too far!" He raised his sword.

"NO!" Sera cried.

Tusi lifted his head high. "I see now I have not gone far enough."

"So be it." Guo Kan brought the blade down.

"HALT!"

The walls seemed to reverberate with the force of the command. Hulagu stood in the doorway. Dak's eyes leapt from the warlord back to Tusi and Guo Kan. The general's sword hung poised in the air, mid-strike, inches from Tusi's neck.

"Sheathe that sword," Hulagu said.

Guo Kan lowered his blade and drove it hard into its scabbard.

"What goes on here?" Hulagu asked.

"Tusi and these children conspire against you, great khan," the general said. "I came to stop them."

“That is not true,” Tusi said. “Great khan, it is your general who has betrayed your trust. He intended harm to these children, even though you had placed them under your protection.”

“Only as I awaited your reading,” Hulagu said.

Tusi bowed his head. “Yes, of course.”

“Have you completed your reading of the stars?” Hulagu asked.

“I have,” Tusi said. “They tell me —”

“Do not trust him, great khan!” the general said. “He means to bend your will to his.”

“That is not true!” Tusi shouted.

“Silence!” Hulagu held up both hands. Then he turned to Dak and Sera. “Perhaps it is time I allow these unexpected visitors to speak to me themselves.” He looked up at the guy holding Dak. “Release them.”

The warrior let Dak out of his grip. The Mongol standing next to Dak released Sera at the same time.

“Thank you, great khan,” Dak said.

“I have little patience, boy,” Hulagu said. “Why have you come here? How is it you found your way so close to my throne without my permission?”

“How we came here is a very long story,” Sera said. “But why we have come is very, very important, great khan.”

“Then tell me.” Hulagu folded his arms. “Quickly. My patience comes to an end.”

Sera looked at Dak. The moment had arrived, the very thing they’d decided they needed to do from the beginning. Hulagu had to be convinced. And Dak thought he knew how. It came back to a question Riq had raised on the road to Baghdad.

*Why did Dak like history so much?*

“Great khan,” Dak said, “this world is a pretty uncertain place. Most events are completely unpredictable. Sometimes it’s confusing, and it’s hard to know what’s going on. I don’t like not knowing what’s going on.

I like to understand things. I use history to help me do that. It's written. It's settled. It happened and that's that. It can help me make sense of things in the present."

Hulagu looked a bit confused, but he said, "Go on."

"You look to the stars for that, right? The heavens are fixed up there. They move across the sky in the same paths, night after night, year after year. You look up to help you know what to do. To help you figure things out. Right?"

Hulagu looked at Tusi. "With the aid of learned men, yes."

"Well," Dak said, "we've come from a distant land with a message for you."

"Who sent you?" Hulagu asked.

"Learned men," Sera said.

"And the message?" Hulagu asked.

"You need to build an observatory," Dak said. "A place where your . . . learned men can study the stars. And give you the best advice."

Hulagu turned to Tusi. "Well? What do you make of this?"

"I am in agreement, great khan. I would be a much better adviser to you if I had a place dedicated to observing the heavens. A true observatory."

"And where would this observatory be located?" Hulagu asked.

"A favorable site would need to be found, but I believe the mountains of Maragheh would be ideal."

"I see," Hulagu said.

"I offer myself, great khan," Tusi said. "I will direct this observatory to your greater glory, to your long life, and to the legacy of your empire."

Dak watched Tusi and had to agree with what Guo Kan had said. The man was a survivor. Tusi would probably come out of this just fine. And it looked like Hulagu was coming around to the idea.

"This proposal appeals to me," Hulagu said.



“The construction will be costly,” Tusi said. “To offset the expense to you, might I offer an additional thought?”

“You may,” Hulagu said.

“Now that Baghdad has fallen,” Tusi said, “the fruits of its many libraries belong to you, and are ripe for plucking. And an observatory under your patronage, the greatest the world has known, should also have a library of great renown.”

Dak waited. This was the moment. Right here. History was about to be rewritten. Suddenly, that thought struck Dak in a way it never had before, and he felt like he’d been tipped on his side. Everything was off-kilter. He’d finally realized what history meant to him, and now, that was being taken away from him. History wasn’t settled. Not at all. And Dak was unsettling it.

But without history, what else could he rely on?

Hulagu turned to Guo Kan. “What do you have to say?”

Guo Kan quivered with rage. “Your men have fought valiantly for a share of the riches of Baghdad.”

“Books?” Hulagu snorted. “My men do not expect books.”

Guo Kan’s mouth snapped shut.

“Can you see any objection to this observatory?” Hulagu asked the general.

Guo Kan was in a very dangerous spot, Dak could see that. Hulagu looked to have made up his mind. If the general raised no objection, he failed the SQ, and the Break would be fixed. But if he objected, he risked the khan’s wrath. Dak waited anxiously to see what the Time Warden would do, and where his true loyalties lay.

“I do not think this is a wise course,” Guo Kan said.

Hulagu scowled. “Then you are not in harmony with me. And you raised your sword against my adviser. For this, you will be imprisoned for a time until I decide what judgment best falls upon you.” Hulagu then ordered the two warriors to take Guo Kan into custody.

The general didn't look so divine anymore. He'd finally been defeated. He surrendered his sword and went with the warriors without putting up a fight, and without making eye contact with anyone in the room.

After he was gone, Hulagu said, "My general does make one good point. My men are restless. They hunger for destruction."

"I only need a few days," Tusi said.

"Once the caliph has surrendered," Hulagu said, "I can hold my men back for three days. That is all the time you have to pick your fruit."



## Buried Treasure

RIQ WAITED at the House of Wisdom with Abi for days, with no word or sign from Dak and Sera. Many, many times he wanted to go after them, but Abi wouldn't allow it. He said Riq had to safeguard the Infinity Ring, and that meant he couldn't take it anywhere near Guo Kan. Riq thought he could just leave it behind at the House of Wisdom, but Abi insisted that was too risky. In the end, Riq reluctantly agreed with that reasoning.

But he was going pretty crazy wondering what was going on, and feeling pretty helpless. He paced a lot. And he knew a big part of his fear was about what would happen once they finished this Break. He spent hours holding the Infinity Ring. Just staring at it. This device had the power to erase him.

On the seventh day of the siege, the sounds of battle ceased, and Riq walked to a secluded room and sat down, the Infinity Ring in his lap. He tried really hard to believe that Sera and Dak were safe. That they would come soon.

"I'm certain they are well."

Riq looked up. Abi had come into the room.

"I know," Riq said.

"But that is not the only thing troubling you, is it?"

"No," Riq said.

“What else?” Abi asked.

It felt easier to think of telling Abi about it than it did Sera and Dak. “I messed with my own timeline. I’m not sure I exist anymore.”

“Of course you exist,” Abi said. “You affirm that just by asking the question.”

“No,” Riq said. “I exist here because we’re still in a kind of warp. Dak and Sera and I are slipping through time, and we’re not affected yet by what we’re doing. But the world we left behind is being affected by everything we do. And when I go back there, I don’t know what will happen. I could disappear, like I’d never even been there.”

Abi was silent. “That is a heavy burden.”

Riq had to laugh. “Yeah. Pretty heavy.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know.” Riq rolled the Infinity Ring over. “I’ve thought about just staying in the past somewhere. I almost did that recently.” The image of Kisa came into his mind. How happy he’d been with her. The way she’d felt to him like she filled a Remnant.

“What made you change your mind?”

“I have a mission. I have a responsibility. And I want to honor the sacrifices made by others to get us to this point.”

“That is very noble,” Abi said.

“Thanks.”

“What else could you do?” Abi asked.

Riq shook his head. He frowned. “Just go back. See what happens. Or *not* see what happens.”

“I don’t understand time travel,” Abi said. “But let me ask you this. Are you only a product of the past? Or are you something more? Are you not also the decisions you make right now in the present?”

That was a pretty deep question. But it seemed important. “I guess I’m kind of both.”

“Exactly,” Abi said. “I believe that even if your past is erased, there is still the part of you that is here, right now, being true and noble, worrying about your friends and seeking to honor them. That makes you real to me.”

A knot formed in Riq’s throat. He swallowed. “Thanks, Abi.”



The next morning, Riq was standing in the courtyard of the House of Wisdom when Dak, Sera, and Tusi walked through the front doors. He laughed and ran toward them, and the three time travelers hugged. There was so much to talk about, but no time. Dak and Sera explained that Hulagu had only given them a few days to save the books in the House of Wisdom.

“The caliph will surrender in four days,” Dak said. “Hulagu said he would hold his men off for three days after that.”

“I’m not certain how you know that about the caliph,” Tusi said. “But I believe you. And that means I have a week to save what I can.”

Abi stepped forward. “I’ll be happy to assist you. I’m very familiar with the most important volumes in the House of Wisdom.” He looked at Riq, Sera, and Dak with a smile.

Riq knew what he meant, those most important volumes being those written by Aristotle about the Great Breaks. It seemed they had succeeded. The Time Wardens had been defeated. The Break was fixed.

“We did it,” he said.

“Did you?” came a familiar voice.

Riq turned to see the Market Inspector standing at the entrance, with half a dozen guards at his side. Each of them held a burning torch in his hand, and Riq realized with horror what they planned to do. One way or another, the library would be destroyed, if not by the Mongols, then by the SQ themselves.

“How dare you!” Tusi said. “Hulagu Khan has placed this library under his protection!”

The Market Inspector spread his arms. “Is he here to protect it? Because all I see are a few children and two scholars.”

“Perhaps that’s all we need,” Abi said. “Tusi, Hystorians, come with me.”

They all backed away from the guards, and the Market Inspector laughed. “Run. Run away. Meanwhile, we’ll torch this place room by room.”

His guards scattered in different directions, and soon, flames began to appear in all the doorways around the courtyard. How many books were burning right now? How much knowledge had just been lost in an instant? Riq raged inside, but there wasn’t anything he could do.

“Come!” Abi said. “Follow me!”

He led them deep into the House of Wisdom, through doorways and down hallways Riq had never seen. They eventually took a flight of steps downward and came to a room with a lock on the door. It was a very peculiar lock, with several spinning brass dials filled with scrolling Arabic letters.

Abi rotated the dials. “An invention of the Banū Mūsā brothers. You have to know the secret word to unlock it.” A moment later, the dials clicked into place, and the door opened. “Go, go.”

Riq smiled. *Open sesame.*

Inside, they found a small room with earthen walls, almost a cave, with another door on the opposite side. Several chests sat in the middle of the floor.

“These contain the works of Aristotle,” Abi said. “I gathered them together when you Hystorians first arrived, against the day we might need to move them. We must take these now.”

“But the House of Wisdom!” Dak said.

“There is nothing we can do,” Abi said. “But these books must survive. And there are many other libraries in Baghdad, with hundreds of thousands of books. Tusi and I will save as many as we can before the Mongols begin their destruction. And we will see that they are copied, so that these words may spread to many libraries in many lands.”

Riq thought about what Abi was saying, and realized he was right. This was now the only way. Maybe it had been all along. The important thing was that they would now be able to fix the Prime Break, because the works of Aristotle would survive in a new library. It was like that riddle they’d solved at the beginning. This small room was a cave of wonders, and these chests contained history’s light.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Abi opened the other door, which led them outside the House of Wisdom, down by the river. A small boat waited there, and they loaded the chests of books into it. Then Abi and Tusi climbed aboard, and Abi used the oars to slide them out into the river’s current.

“Wait!” Tusi said. “What about the children?”

“They have a very special boat of their own,” Abi said, smiling. “One that sails backward up the river.”

Riq, Sera, and Dak waved at the two scholars. Abi’s grin never fell as he waved back, but Tusi simply looked completely confused. Once the scholars were safely away from the House of Wisdom, Sera pulled the Square back out.

“New coordinates,” she said. “Give me the Ring.”

Riq handed it over to her. As she punched in the data, he looked up at the smoke rising into the air from within the House of Wisdom, the ashes carried over their heads into the river. The destruction of Baghdad had begun. But it would not be a complete destruction, not anymore. Many of its books, its wisdom and knowledge, would survive.

“Ready!” Sera said.

The three of them took hold of the Infinity Ring. As the device hummed in his hand, and the world began to shimmer and break apart in a shower of sparks, Riq thought back to what Abi had said.

Riq was making choices *now*.

That had to count for something.





## Epilogue

SERA BLINKED.

The smoke and the burning House of Wisdom were gone, but they were still standing on the banks of a wide river. This was clearly not the Tigris, though. This river was lined with green trees. It was summer here, and the warm, humid air stuck to Sera's skin. Insects buzzed around them, and frogs croaked from the mud.

"Where are we?" Dak asked. "What river is this?"

Sera checked the Square. "The Mississippi. It's the summer of 1804."

"1804?" Dak got that familiar look in his eye.

Sera smiled. "Yes, 1804." She glanced at Riq, who seemed ready to shut Dak down. But since she and Dak had talked back in Hulagu's palace, she found she wasn't so bothered by Dak's enthusiasm. "Please, tell us about 1804."

"Well"—Dak cleared his throat—"that was the year the Louisiana Expedition left from St. Louis."

Right. Sera remembered something about that from school. "Go on."

Dak beamed. "President Jefferson had just acquired the Louisiana Purchase, which was this huge territory of land. He basically doubled the size of the United States. But he didn't really know what was out there,

so he sent an expedition to explore. They were supposed to travel along the Missouri River and find a route to the Pacific Ocean.”

“Supposed to?” Riq echoed.

“Yeah,” Dak said. “But it was a complete disaster. Nobody made it back alive.”

The three of them looked at one another. It was another life-or-death situation — this time in the wilderness, far from the comforts of anything like the House of Wisdom.

Dak continued. “What happened to the expedition is a mystery. Jefferson believed all kinds of crazy rumors about the West. He thought there were mammoths out there, and volcanoes, and mountains made of salt.”

“Mammoths have been extinct for more than four thousand years at this point,” Sera said.

“Yup,” Dak said. “We know that now, but when the explorers failed to return, nobody knew what to believe. All they could say for sure was that the territory was dangerous. It was declared off-limits for decades. Jefferson was disgraced because he’d spent all this money. The country was mad at him, and he only served one term as president —” Dak paused.

“What is it?” Sera asked.

“It’s just . . .” Dak’s eyebrows creased together. He looked worried. “I have to remember to question everything now. Everything I thought I knew about history.”

“Like what?” Riq asked.

“Like the Louisiana Expedition. What if it wasn’t simply a failure? What if it was *sabotaged*? What if the SQ got involved, and they ruined Jefferson’s reputation on purpose? Doesn’t that seem like something they would do?”

Sera looked out over the smooth river flowing past. “That seems *exactly* like something they would do.”

“There should be a fort somewhere around here,” Dak said. “Camp Wood. It’s where the expedition really got started, on the outskirts of St. Louis.”

“I entered the coordinates carefully,” Sera said. “It has to be close.”

“Then that’s where we should begin,” Riq said. “Let’s look around. Just, uh, be on the lookout for bears.”

They started up the bank of the river, moving slowly through the trees and the underbrush. Birds skimmed the water and sang from the branches overhead. Sera had to admit, after the desert it was nice to be in a place that was so full of life. Even if some of it wanted to eat her.

They hadn’t gone very far when Riq held up his hand to stop them. He pointed ahead, and through the trees Sera glimpsed the log wall of a fort in the distance. It looked just like the paintings she had seen of the American frontier. Tall tree trunks stood tightly together, sharpened at the top like a row of gigantic pencils.

“I think that’s Camp Wood,” Dak whispered. He motioned toward a cluster of cabins and cottages that stood between them and the fort. “And this must be St. Louis. It’s a total frontier town in this era. It’s the edge of civilization, as far as the Americans of the time are concerned.”

Something about the place felt sinister to Sera. “Do you think there are any Time Wardens this far west?”

“It’s definitely possible,” Dak said. “If the SQ sabotaged the expedition, they probably have an agent here. Unless he’s on the road with Lewis and Clark.”

Riq turned to Dak. “Lewis and Clark?”

“Right,” Dak said. “Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Jefferson put them in charge of the expedition. They were last seen leaving Camp Wood.”

Riq smirked. “What do you want to bet the Break has something to do with helping these Lewis and Clark guys?”

Sera had the same thought. It was getting to the point where she could tell when something was wrong. She could almost feel it in her gut, as if she was becoming a real Hystorian with real Hystorian instincts.

“I bet you’re right,” Dak said. “But the expedition left weeks ago.”

“Then we have some catching up to do,” Riq said.

A journey into the wild American frontier sounded exciting to Sera, but no matter what anyone said, she was *not* going to wear a dress.

And then she saw something that chilled her blood. It was carved into the wooden homes before them. It was stitched into flags and sacks of dry goods.

The symbol of the SQ was *everywhere*.

The SQ didn’t just have an agent in St. Louis. They controlled the entire town.

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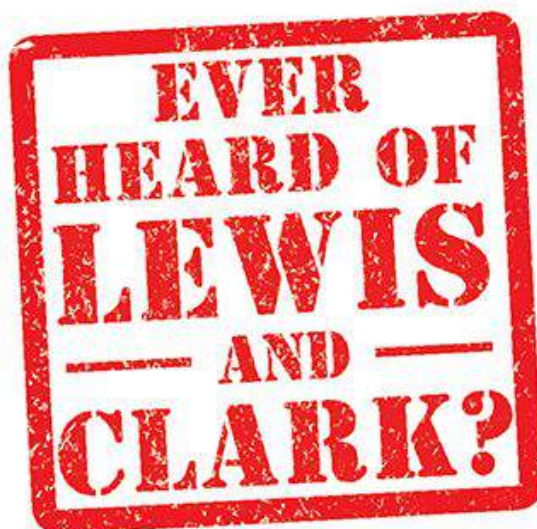


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I didn't think so.

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Your mission? Follow their trail, track them down, and free them!

Background: In 1803, our country doubled in size with the Louisiana Purchase. To explore the newly acquired land, President Thomas Jefferson created the Corps of Discovery, which, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, set out in 1804. Their goal was to look for a water route to the Pacific Ocean, create maps of the land, and make trade connections with the American Indians.

There were many challenges, including mosquitos, ticks, snakes, disease, and the broiling hot sun. And then, worst of all: the SQ.

Can YOU find Lewis and Clark in time?

— Arin



### STATS

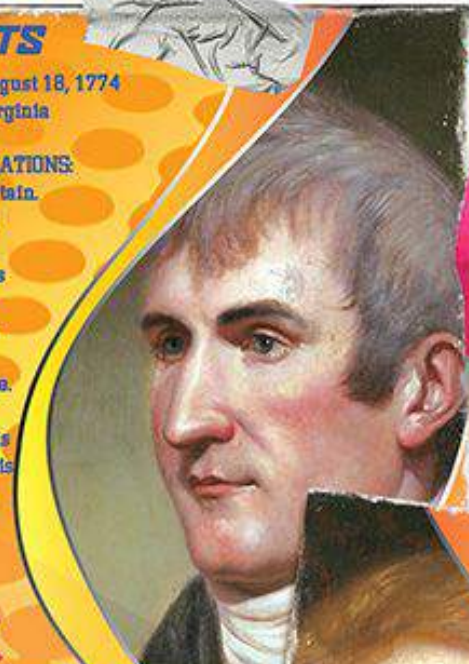
BORN: August 18, 1774  
FROM: Virginia

#### QUALIFICATIONS:

Army captain.  
President Thomas Jefferson's personal secretary.  
Travel experience.

PET: Lewis brought his loyal dog, Seaman, along.

**MERIWETHER LEWIS**



BFFS  
↔

### STATS

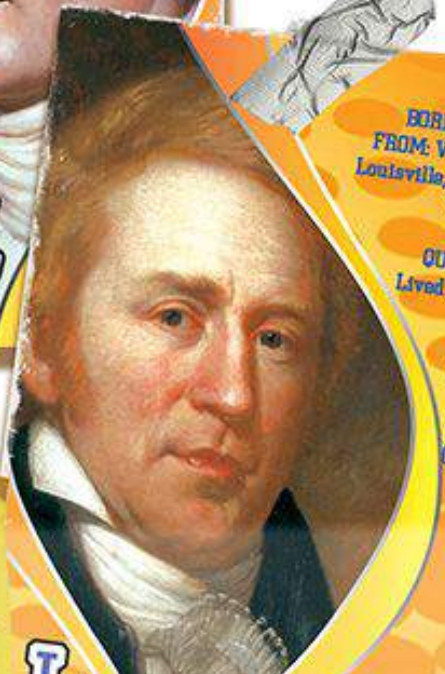
BORN: August 1, 1770  
FROM: Virginia. Moved to Louisville, Kentucky, when he was fourteen.

#### QUALIFICATIONS:

Lived many years on the frontier.  
Experienced outdoorsman.  
Soldier.  
Cartographer (map maker).

L & C

**WILLIAM CLARK**



WEAKNESS: Spelling! In his journals, Clark had very inconsistent spelling—especially for the words "Sioux" and "potato." He even spelled his own brother Edmund's name in three different ways. (Clark also usually capitalized words starting with the letter S—no matter where in the sentence they appeared!)



One of the medals  
Lewis and Clark  
brought from  
President Jefferson  
as a symbol of peace.



We are being forced to  
lead the SQ! If you see  
this mark, you're on  
our trail.

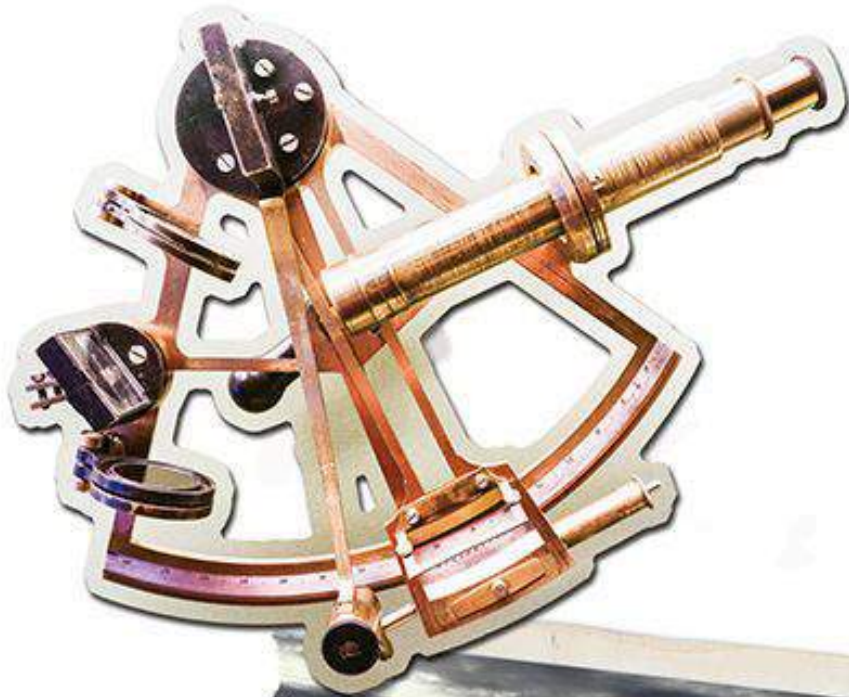
PLEASE  
HELP.

-Lewis  
and Clark

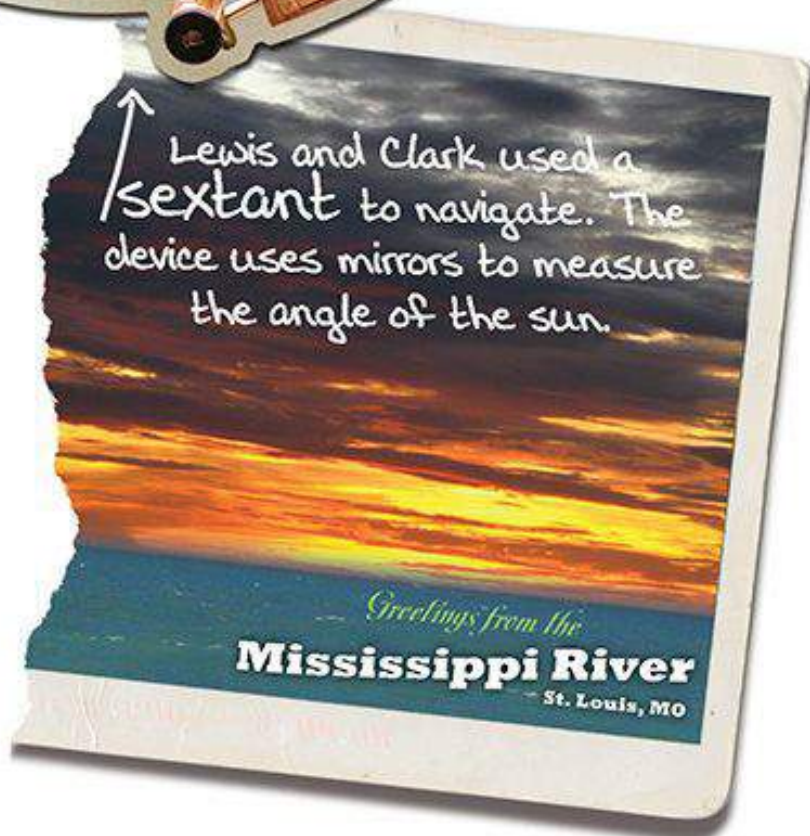




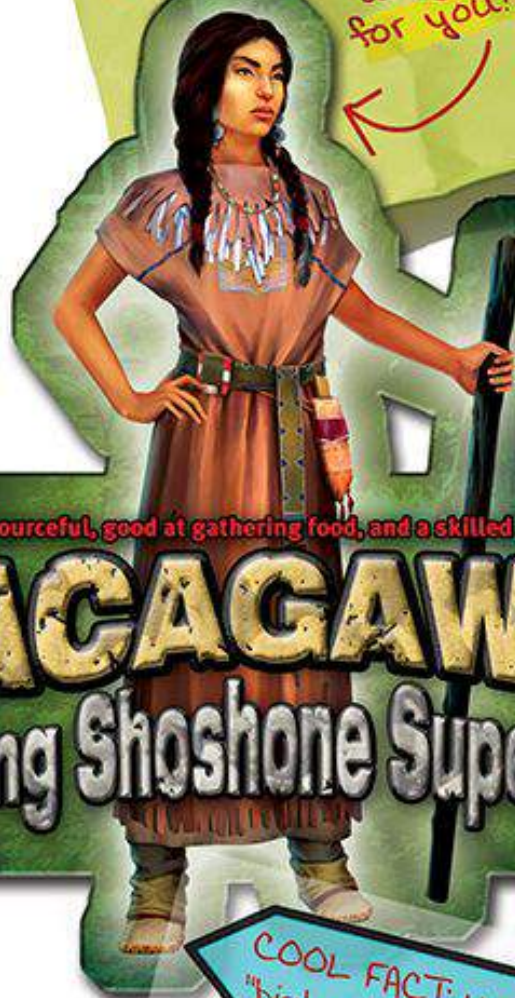




Lewis and Clark used a  
**sextant** to navigate. The  
device uses mirrors to measure  
the angle of the sun.



She tried to help  
Lewis and Clark—  
and could be a  
useful  
ally  
for you!



Calm and resourceful, good at gathering food, and a skilled translator, too.

# SACAGAWEA

## Young Shoshone Superstar

COOL FACT: Her name means  
"bird woman."



**DANGER FOR SURE!!** When the explorers saw their first grizzly bears, they thought it would be easy to take down the large animals with their rifles. But it wasn't: One time, when the men paused to reload, a bear chased them into the river!



Dak, answer these questions, which only you know the answer to. Then, take the first letter of each word, and that will tell you the location where we left something for you.

-What's your favorite food?

-Which university did we get our degrees from?

-What's your favorite location for a class trip?

-When we were trying to create the Infinity Ring in our lab, Sera was the one who found the

Missing \_\_\_\_\_ ?

# LEWIS & CLARK 1804 THE LAST EXPEDITION



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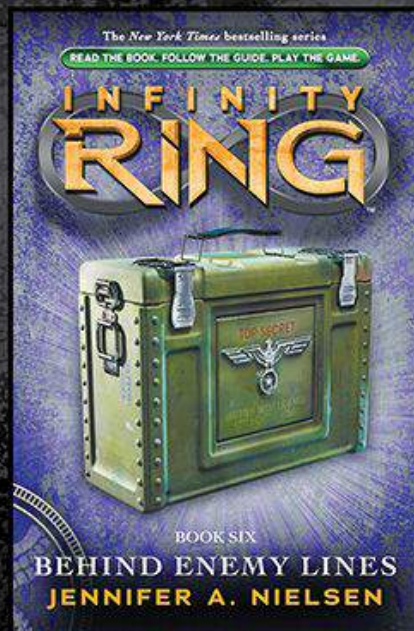
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Below is a sneak peek from Infinity Ring Book 6: *Behind Enemy Lines* by Jennifer Nielsen.



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“My translator isn’t picking up on some of the words,” Sera whispered to Riq. “Maybe it’s broken, too.”

“It’s working fine,” Riq said under his breath. “It just considers this English.”

They sat there a moment in silence, in a space barely big enough for six or seven people. Riq wondered if anyone else would follow them into the shelter, but no one did. Then Dak started to squirm. By now, Riq recognized why. Dak was thinking about some history factoid that just had to be shared, whether anyone wanted to hear it or not.

“Spit it out,” Riq said. “You look like you’ll hurt yourself if you don’t.”

Dak grinned. “The German planes are impressive and all, but the really interesting ones were the British Spitfires. Did you know they

were painted pink? That allowed them to fly almost invisibly below the clouds at sunset. Imagine that — pink warplanes!”

“The only warplanes that interest me right now are the ones over my head,” Sera said. “Why couldn’t we warp into someplace quiet for once?”

Duncan sighed and leaned forward with his hands at rest on his knees. “Aye, it’s as I thought. I ken what ye need. Sit down, lads, and let’s have a blether.”

“A long talk?” Riq rephrased it for Sera’s benefit only. Dak could figure it out on his own. “Talk about what?”

“Ye’re a very long way from home, eh? Measured in years, not miles.”

“How did you know —” Sera started to ask.

But Duncan only smiled. “I recognized ye at once. I’m yer Hystorian.”





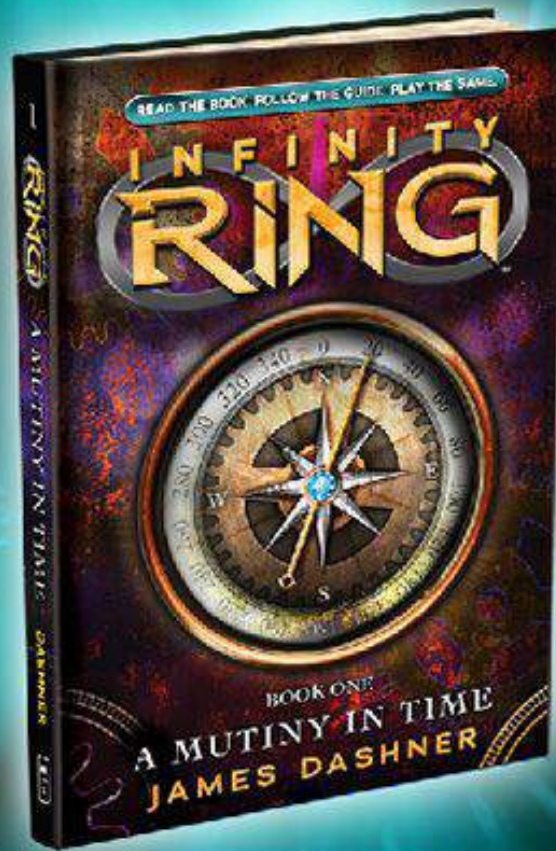
## MATTHEW J. KIRBY



**Matthew J. Kirby** is the author of *The Clockwork Three*, *The Lost Kingdom*, and *Icefall*, winner of the prestigious Edgar Award in 2012. He was born in Utah, but with a father in the military he has lived in many places, including Rhode Island, Maryland, California, and Hawaii. A former school psychologist, he now writes full-time from his home in Idaho, where he lives with his wife.

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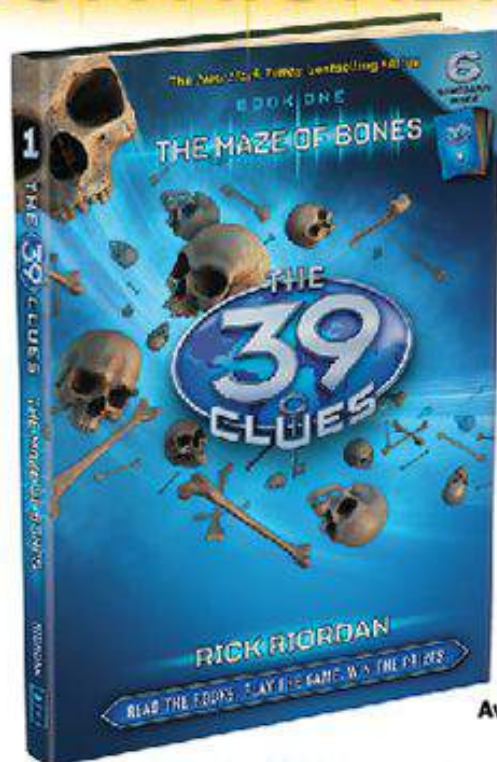
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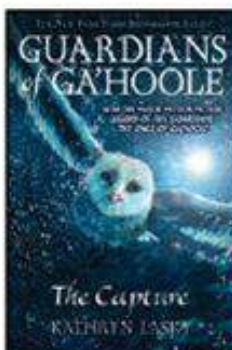
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

e-ISBN 978-0-545-48461-9

Cover illustration by Michael Heath

Cover design by Keirsten Geise

First edition, September 2013

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012

Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1

Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141

Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

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BOOK SIX

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

JENNIFER A. NIELSEN



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## Behind Enemy Lines

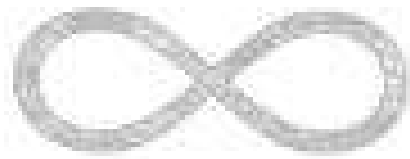
Jennifer A. Nielsen

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To Noah, who will one day hold the world in his hands. There is a price for greatness, for standing out from the crowd. It isn't easy, but in the end it's always worth it.

— J.N.





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# EUROPE, 1943





## Hit and Run

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“My translator isn’t picking up on some of the words,” Sera whispered to Riq. “Maybe it’s broken, too.”

“It’s working fine,” Riq said under his breath. “It just considers this English.”

They sat there a moment in silence, in a space barely big enough for six or seven people. Riq wondered if anyone else would follow them into the shelter, but no one did. Then Dak started to squirm. By now, Riq recognized why. Dak was thinking about some history factoid that just had to be shared, whether anyone wanted to hear it or not.

“Spit it out,” Riq said. “You look like you’ll hurt yourself if you don’t.”

Dak grinned. “The German planes are impressive and all, but the really interesting ones were the British Spitfires. Did you know they were painted pink? That allowed them to fly almost invisibly below the clouds at sunset. Imagine that — pink warplanes!”

“The only warplanes that interest me right now are the ones over my head,” Sera said. “Why couldn’t we warp into someplace quiet for once?”

Duncan sighed and leaned forward with his hands at rest on his knees. “Aye, it’s as I thought. I ken what ye need. Sit down, lads, and let’s have a blether.”

“A long talk?” Riq rephrased it for Sera’s benefit only. Dak could figure it out on his own. “Talk about what?”

“Ye’re a very long way from home, eh? Measured in years, not miles.”

“How did you know —” Sera started to ask.

But Duncan only smiled. “I recognized ye at once. I’m yer Hystorian.”



## The Hystorian's Challenge

DAK SHARED a glance with Riq and Sera. He saw his own question reflected in their eyes: Could they trust Duncan? Ultimately, though, he figured Duncan couldn't be SQ, or else he'd have pushed them into the path of the bombs, not saved them. Then again, they had been tricked before.

Dak decided to take the risk. "If you're our Hystorian, what do you think has gone wrong here?"

Duncan rolled his eyes. "Do ye hear the bombs? The pelter in the streets? C'mon, lad, everything is wrong here!"

But Dak only shook his head. "World War Two was the most destructive war in world history. Millions of people died and the world was never the same again. But even though war is terrible, that doesn't mean history has gone wrong."

In fact, Dak was tired of having history go wrong. Everything he understood about the world was based on his knowledge of the past. Having to doubt the history he knew felt like walking across thin ice and wondering when it would all break apart.

"I ken what you mean," Duncan said. "But the Allies must win this war. If we lose, then it's not only the Nazis who win. It's the SQ also."

Dak closed his eyes. Every student learned about the Second World War in school, and of course, he always knew more about it than the teachers, who usually let him take over the lesson for the class. Not only did this war spread fighting to all corners of the globe, and launch weapons capable of destroying entire cities, losing the war had also shattered the idea of freedom — real freedom — around the world.

On one side were the Axis powers: Germany, Italy, and Japan. Germany was led by Adolf Hitler, someone Dak considered one of the greatest villains of history. Hitler's goal was to build an empire for the people he felt deserved to live, namely those of his own race and ethnicity. Even thinking of him, and the millions who were killed under Hitler's orders, Dak felt sick to his stomach.

Much of the world rose up to fight against the Axis powers, but the Allied powers, as they came to be known, were led by the United States, Russia, and Great Britain. That included Scotland, now under air assault.

"But nobody wins this war, not really." Sera nudged her best friend with her elbow. "Believe it or not, Dak, when you talk, I do pay attention sometimes."

Dak's eyes flew open. "What do you mean *sometimes*?"

She only shrugged a halfhearted apology.

"If you listened to *everything*, then you'd know the most important part," Dak said. "The Axis and Allied powers beat each other into the ground, but a winner does emerge in the end. Because all the destruction creates a void. It leaves a hole for an organization that has been waiting hundreds of years for the right opportunity."

Riq jumped in. "Shortly after the end of World War Two, the SQ openly revealed itself to the world, offering peace, safety, and progress. The world took hold like a drowning man to a rope. But instead of fulfilling its promises, the SQ only brought tyranny and fear."

"Aye, it's as we thought," Duncan said. "The Hystorians believe the Allies must win this war, or else there'll be no stopping the SQ." Then he

pushed out his chest to better display his uniform. “It’s why I joined the Royal Navy. I’ve got to fight, do me part. But we need someone to change the direction o’ things. You three.”

Sera shook her head. “Three kids change the direction of a world war? That’s crazy! There’s no way.”

They paused for a moment while an explosion went off very close to them. Something crashed against the side of their shelter, denting the metal behind Riq. They all scooted in closer to the center and waited for the noise of falling debris to fade.

When it did, Duncan said, “It won’t be easy for ye, but it is possible.”

“How?” Riq asked.

Duncan turned to Dak. “Ye’re a dead clever lad for history, right? Tell me, what do the Allies need so they can win?”

Dak snorted. Asking what he wanted for dinner was a harder question than that. “Germany and Italy were very well defended,” he said. “If the Allies are going to win this war, they have to break through those lines.”

“It’s like a soccer game,” Riq said. “You can play defense all you want, but you’ll never win unless you go on the offense to score a goal.”

“Yeah, Riq,” Dak said. “Major world wars are just like soccer games. Just *exactly the same*.”

Riq and Dak both grunted as Sera kicked each of them in the shins. *Speaking of soccer, that was pretty good skill*, Dak thought. She’d kicked two different targets at the same time, and pretty hard, too.

“I ken your point,” Duncan said. “Aye, the Allies must break through to Germany and Italy. The best place to do it is the island of Sicily.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Dak said. “Guess who else knows how important Sicily is? Germany! Hitler’s got that place so well defended, the Allies could lose everything if they attack there.”

“How can we help?” Sera asked.



Duncan looked around a moment as if checking for any eavesdroppers, which Dak found odd since they were the only ones in the shelter and the air raid was still going on outside. It wasn't really a good time for eavesdropping. When Duncan was satisfied, he said, "He's no Hystorian, but my best mate works in London, in Room 13 of the Admiralty. He told me of a plan there. I've sworn to keep it stum, but I think I should tell ye lads."

To hear better, Dak leaned so far forward he almost lost his balance. He loved the idea of a secret plan!

"What do ye lads think of being spies?" Duncan asked, smiling.

As far as Dak was concerned, that sounded great. He started to tell Duncan about how espionage went back to the earliest days of recorded history, but was cut off by the sound of a woman crying for help out in the alley. Duncan poked his head out the door. "You lot stay here, and be cannie. I'll go help her!"

He ran into the night while Dak, Sera, and Riq watched from the door, hearts in their throats. He got the woman safely beneath an arched doorway, but as he ran back toward the shelter, another explosion went off and rock toppled from the skies above, filling the alley like an avalanche of destruction.

Riq pulled Sera and Dak to the far end of the shelter, and they watched as large chunks of granite filled the small doorway until, only seconds later, it was completely blocked and everything went silent.



## **Riq's Secret**

FOR THE longest time, Sera didn't speak. She couldn't even begin to think of the words that should be spoken in such a moment. The air raid seemed to have ended, or at least, the explosions stopped and the sound of engines passed. But there were no other sounds either, and certainly not Duncan's cheery voice.

Finally, Sera whispered, "Do you think he's . . . ?"

She looked over at Riq, who slowly shook his head. "There's no way he survived that."

The three friends all dropped their eyes to the ground and shared a moment of silence.

"He died a hero," Dak said at last. "And he told us enough to get started here. We have a chance to save a lot of lives."

"Yes, but how?" Sera asked. "The Hystorians can't honestly expect three kids to conquer Sicily."

"We're not conquering anything," Dak said. "Duncan asked if we could do spy work. I think that means we're supposed to work behind the scenes. If we succeed, the Allies will do the conquering."

"So this will be easy," Riq said dryly. "I suppose we could just start asking around to see if anyone is hiring underage spies."

“That’s not helping!” Sera sighed. “Listen, we still have the SQuare. It’ll give us the clues we need.” She looked around. “Where is it?”

Sera looked at Dak, who looked at Riq, who looked back to Sera. Suddenly, they were all talking and pointing fingers. Sera had given the SQuare to Dak when they ran into the crowd. Dak had dropped it to help a child that had fallen, but Riq had picked it up. He had tossed it into the shelter when they climbed in, but none of them remembered seeing it since they got inside.

Then Dak frowned and pointed to the entrance. “There it is.”

“There it *was*,” Sera mumbled. Sure enough, a corner of the SQuare could be seen in the entrance, crunched beneath tons of granite, wood, and bricks. Even if they could pull it out — and they couldn’t — it was totally destroyed.

Sera blinked back the sting in her eyes. She wasn’t going to cry, not about *this*.

“If you had the right materials,” Dak said, “you could —”

“Somehow I doubt there’s a wide availability of lanthanum or neodymium in 1943,” Sera said, thinking of the metals she would need to properly repair the SQuare.

“It’s okay.” Riq seemed eerily calm. “We knew this moment would come. We need a new SQuare. You and Dak have to go home and get another one.”

Riq was right — a trip to the future was the only way to get another working SQuare. But she couldn’t ignore how Riq had left himself out of the plan.

“Why not you?” Sera asked. “People back home will want to see you.”

“How would you know?” Riq snapped.

Sera still didn’t understand, but her eyes darted to Dak, who was staring at Riq and slowly nodding as if he had figured out some big

secret. Whatever it was, it couldn't be worth breaking the three of them up.

Dak caught Riq's eye. "Okay, so where do we go once we get home? Last time we dropped in on the ol' HQ, we were blindfolded."

"It's not hard to find if you know where to look," Riq said. "Just outside of the city limits is an old shoelace factory."

"Tiny Worm Shoelaces?" Sera smiled. "Yeah, my uncle drives past that place every day on his way to work. He always makes fun of it."

"Everyone does." Dak scoffed. "Seriously, who wants to wear shoelaces that look like worms? So the headquarters are near there?"

"No," Riq said. "That *is* the headquarters. Tiny Worm Shoelaces is an anagram, a name lame enough to keep the public and the SQ away, but to let all Hystorians know they're —"

"Welcome," Sera finished. Once she knew it was an anagram, unscrambling the letters was easy. "Hystorians Welcome. That's what the building's name really says."

"Exactly!" Riq turned his attention to Sera. "You and Dak should find Arin there, and a lot of other people who can load a new SQuare for you."

"We'll all go together," Sera said. "It's too dangerous to leave anyone behind."

Riq pressed his eyebrows together and for a moment looked as if he was about to say something. Then he shrugged and said, "If we're going to be spies, someone has to stay here and start creating a cover story for us. I'll do that."

"We have a time machine," Sera said. "We can build the cover story when we come back."

"Trust me, it has to be this way." Riq's tone was more insistent this time. "Listen, you can warp back to London one week from today's date. That'll give me time to get there and start figuring things out."

“We could meet at the Tower of London, right at noon,” Dak said. “Fascinating place. A lot of beheadings happened there, including a couple of queens. It was also a zoo —”

“No!” Sera felt angry that Riq wasn’t budging, and that Dak wasn’t helping her. “We’re not leaving without Riq. What if he gets into trouble with the SQ?”

“I won’t,” Riq said. “Tower of London, one week from today. I’ll be there.”

“Plug in the coordinates to take us home,” Dak said to Sera. Then he turned to Riq. “Stay safe, dude.”

Sera reluctantly entered the coordinates, but she had no intention of pressing the button to send them away until she convinced Riq, and now Dak, that they must all stay together.

Dak put his hand on the Ring and shared a grim look with Riq that Sera didn’t like. Whatever secret Riq had, it was big, and she was sure by now that Dak knew what it was.

“Take my hand,” Sera said to Riq. “Whatever is wrong, we’ll fix it together.”

“See you in a week,” Dak said. And then before Sera could stop him, he pushed the button that would send them away.

Sera was yanked into the warp still yelling at Dak and holding out a hand to Riq. Dak had a firm grip on her at first, but as they were pulled along the time stream he cried out in pain, and nearly lost hold of her and the Ring. Now it was Sera’s job to grip Dak tightly. She wouldn’t lose him to time the way he had lost his parents.

After what seemed like a particularly long trip, Sera was spat out of the warp onto solid ground. The usual shudder ran through her, but she shook it off and turned her attention toward Dak. He was curled into a ball beside her and visibly shaking.

“Wh-wh-what’s hap-pening t-t-to me?” Dak said.

“Oh,” Sera said softly. “You’ve just had a Remnant.”



## A Homecoming Welcome

SERA HAD experienced hundreds of Remnants in her life, some of them so awful they literally made her sick. They always left her cold and often in tears. Having become so familiar with them, it wasn't hard to recognize when her best friend had just experienced his first one.

Lying on the ground, Dak continued shivering like they'd just landed in the middle of an arctic winter.

“If you're st-st-still mad at m-me,” he said through chattering teeth, “feel fr-fr-free to gloat.”

She *was* still angry with him. He'd been wrong to leave Riq behind, and never should've forced her to leave that way. But it was hard to stay angry while he looked so pathetic.

Sera crouched down beside him and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You never get used to it, but at least the feelings pass pretty fast.” The Remnant was probably made worse by the stresses of time travel, which were already hard enough. At least he'd stopped shivering.

Dak rolled to a sitting position and wrapped his arms around his legs. “I'm sorry, Sera. I never understood before. Not really.”

“I wish you didn't have to understand now.” Then she smiled and bumped his side with her elbow. “But this is the point of what we've been doing. We're fixing things.”

She had expected Dak to respond with his usual positive attitude, or at least something playfully sarcastic.

But now he only looked at her with eyes that had become hollow and hopeless. “Not this time, Sera. You said that Remnants are a feeling that something has gone wrong. That what you see with your eyes isn’t what you feel is true.” He turned away and shook his head. “Well, something’s definitely wrong. I think coming back here was a mistake.”

“We didn’t have any choice. If we don’t get a new SQuare, we’ll have no way of knowing what else needs to be fixed.”

“Then let’s just get it and leave as fast as we can.”

That was what they *should do*, yes. But Sera still felt haunted by what she’d seen in the Cataclysm. She longed to go home, just for a minute, just to check that everything there was okay. And maybe better than okay. Sera had learned, to her horror, that her parents were destined to die in the Cataclysm. But that meant they should be alive *now*. What if they were at home waiting for her? Or . . . what if they weren’t? To go there and find her home as empty as before, it would almost feel like she was losing them all over again.

Dak shuddered, drawing Sera’s attention back to him. “Can’t you feel it, too, Sera? This is all wrong. Being here will ruin everything we’ve already done.”

She squinted against the rising sun behind him. “How can being in the present ruin the past?”

“I don’t know! But it does, okay? Something’s going to happen that —” He stopped, as if choking on his own sentence.

“That what?” He didn’t answer and Sera asked, “What’s with you and Riq all of a sudden? Do you know why he wouldn’t come back with us?”

“I think so.” Dak shrugged. “He’s been acting weird ever since 1850, with Harriet Tubman. And I think I figured out why.” Then he turned to Sera. “But that’s for him to talk about, not me.”

“Is it bad?”

Dak nodded. “Yeah. If I’m right, it’s pretty bad.”

“And your Remnant, the one you just had —”

Dak got to his feet and began running down the quiet street. He called behind his shoulder, “Let’s just get the new SQuare, okay?”

Sera ran after him, but her mind was racing even faster. She knew how hard it had been to tell Dak what she had seen in the Cataclysm. And Riq clearly knew something that kept him from coming here at all. What had Dak just experienced that he didn’t want to share with her?



It only took one look at the Hystorians’ headquarters to know it was completely destroyed. Maybe a tornado had driven right through the building, or maybe this was all that was left after the SQ had invaded.

That was a cheery thought, Dak realized. To not know the difference between an SQ attack and a natural disaster.

“When are we?” he asked. “I mean, how much time has passed here since we left?”

“It’s only been a couple of days,” Sera said. “I figured if we came back much later then there would be too many people looking for us. We did just sort of up and disappear.”

Yeah, Sera would think of things like that. If it had been up to Dak, they would’ve come back early enough to save his parents, or at least in time to warn the Hystorians about the SQ attack on their headquarters. But maybe bumping into their old selves would create some huge time paradox. Probably not a good thing.

Still staring at the ruins ahead of them, Sera said, “The Hystorians won’t be in there anymore. How far do you think it is from here to your house?”

Dak shook his head. “We’re not going back there.”



“Riq said the Hystorians watched your parents’ lab. If we go there, they’ll find us.”

“Maybe the SQ watches it, too. I’ll betcha Riq didn’t think of that!”

Dak knew he’d scored a point there, but the look on Sera’s face told him that she understood the real reason for his protests. He didn’t want to go home, not yet. Wherever and *whenever* they’d traveled, Dak’d been too busy figuring out puzzles, dodging Time Wardens, and living the world’s history to think too much about his parents. To wonder if they were still all right. And to worry about what would happen to them if he failed.

But if he went home, that was all he’d be able to think about. Losing them once was hard enough. He didn’t want to go through that again.

“We don’t even have to go inside,” Sera told him. “Just make sure the Hystorians know we’ve come back. Then they’ll give us a new SQuare, and after a quick stop at my house, we’ll hurry back to 1943 again. Easy-peasy. No problem.”

Dak caught the part about a visit to her house, but he wasn’t going to argue with that. He knew she had questions that made her want to go home just as strongly as he wanted to avoid his own. So he began trudging along beside Sera. “Okay, we’ll go to my house. But the one thing I’m learning about time travel is that there’s *always* a problem.”



## A New Traveler

IF IT really only had been a couple of days since they left, then Dak and Sera had barely missed some truly harrowing events. A gap in the earth had split open along Main Street and was so wide in some places that entire cars had been swallowed into it. Several windows of their school were boarded up with a *CONDEMNED* sign across the entrance. And the theater near Dak's home now had an uprooted tree lodged upside down through its roof. Where the current show's name had once been *The Farthing Family's Music*, the *h* in *Farthing* was now missing from the billboard.

Dak snorted out a laugh and pointed to the sign. "Look, Sera, now it says —"

"I can see what it says."

"That would make some interesting music, all right."

Sera only rolled her eyes while Dak continued laughing. "I need to hang out with more girls," she mumbled under her breath.

Dak sighed as they turned into his neighborhood. "Just trying to lighten the mood. I gotta say, this was not the welcome I was expecting. Where is everybody? And shouldn't things be a little bit better than when we left? I mean, we've done a pretty amazing job of fixing Breaks so far."

Sera nodded silently. This was almost harder than when she'd seen the Cataclysm. Because as awful as it was now, she knew it would only get worse. The streets were entirely empty, but eyes peered back at them from windows and doorways. She wanted to scream at the people to run, but where could any of them go? Everything, everywhere was going to be destroyed.

"We have to succeed," she said to Dak in a hushed voice. "No matter how tired, or scared, or worried we get —"

"We won't give up," Dak finished for her. "I agree."

There were no signs of any Hystorians when they approached Dak's house. Not that Sera had expected any, but it would've been nice to have some idea of how to get another SQuare. His parents' lab seemed quiet enough, though the door was slightly ajar. Maybe the Hystorians really were watching this place.

"Do you have the Infinity Ring programmed already?" Dak asked.

"Yes." No matter how badly she wanted to go home, the devastation had convinced her it wasn't a good idea. For all she knew, the Cataclysm could kick off at any moment. And besides, Sera didn't like the way Dak had looked after his Remnant. The minute that SQuare got into their hands, she wanted to leave for someplace safer. *Like the battlefield of a world war*, she thought wryly.

"Then let's get the SQuare and go," Dak said. "All we need now is a Hystorian."

"I'll bet Arin left us some sort of message inside the lab," Sera said. "Maybe even a code, like we always get on the SQuare, to tell us where to go next."

Dak's eyes darted left and then right as if he was uncomfortable. "Why don't you go check that out? I'll, uh . . . keep watch out here."

This time, Sera didn't push. She knew he didn't want to be reminded of his parents any more than he had to be. And maybe he was still shaken

by the Remnant he'd experienced. Unfortunately, Sera understood how that could feel, too.

So she nodded and said she'd be back in a minute or two.

It was dark inside and the lights didn't flip on when she tried them. That wasn't a big surprise. That earthquake along Main Street likely destroyed much of the city's power grid. But the Smyths' private generator, which kept their computers running, was still humming along. She could see the dim light of the screens at the far end of the room and used it to guide her way forward.

"Hello?" a woman's voice called.

Sera froze as a chair that had been facing the computers slowly spun her way. She squinted, hoping to see whoever was seated there better, but with the only light coming from behind the chair, the person was cast in shadow.

"Sera, is that you?" the voice asked. "What a relief to see that you're still safe! Is Dak here, too?"

"He's waiting outside," Sera replied. "Who are you?"

"We met at the Hystorians' headquarters. I hoped you'd come back here."

Sera stepped forward a little closer. The voice did sound familiar, but everything had happened so quickly before they escaped the headquarters, it was hard to place it. She didn't think it was Arin's voice, or Mari's. What other women had they spoken to that day?

"I'm sorry, what was your name?" Sera asked.

The woman leaned forward and, for a moment, Sera thought she got a glimpse of an angular chin. But then the woman reclined and her face disappeared again into the shadows. "You haven't completed your mission, Sera. Why are you here?"

"Our Square was destroyed during an air raid in World War Two."

"And is the Infinity Ring okay? You have it with you?"

Sera clutched the satchel in her hands. “It’s fine. We just need a new SQuare and then we’ll hurry back there.”

“Certainly. I have one right here. Come on over and I’ll get it for you.”

The woman returned to face the computers and plugged a SQuare in, probably to update it with the most recent data. Still, Sera didn’t walk any closer, and she kept an eye on the exit, just in case.

“Marq is okay, too,” Sera said casually.

“Who?” The woman remained facing away as she worked on the SQuare.

“Marq — the Hystorian you sent to help us with languages.”

“Oh, yes . . . Marq. Fine young man.”

Sera’s mouth pinched together. Whoever was seated in that chair, it was no Hystorian. All of them would’ve known it was Riq who came with them, and that there was no Marq.

“There now, I have your SQuare ready,” the woman said. “But there’ve been some big changes since you left. Call Dak in and I can explain them to you both.”

“Sure.” Sera already had her fingers wrapped around the Infinity Ring. She would get outside, grab Dak’s hand, and get them out of here. The explanations could come later.

Only Sera had barely turned around before Dak burst through the door. “We have to go right now!” he cried. “There’s SQ coming!”

“Actually,” the woman said, “we’re already here!” And with that, she stood and her face was fully lit by the computers around her. Sera saw the fierce lines of her jaw, hard and square. The red glow of the SQuare in her hand deepened the bloodred tones of her hair, and as the woman came closer, her oily black lips whispered, “It will be less painful for you both if you just give me the Ring.”

“Tilda!” Dak hissed.

Sera remembered Tilda all too well. The woman was an ambitious leader within the SQ, intent on clawing her way to the top. She had led the raid on the Hystorians' headquarters, a raid in which good people had been killed, and she had obviously been waiting for their return.

"Now don't go anywhere, Sera," Tilda said. "Don't you know how much you've worried your parents?"

Sera froze. Dak clutched her arm as if he wasn't sure whether she'd bull-charge the woman or faint on the spot.

But Sera didn't move. "Where are they?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"Mommy and Daddy?" Tilda laughed, a humorless, throaty laugh that screeched like nails on a chalkboard. "Oh, they're fine . . . for now. But they have a lot of explaining to do, and they won't be slipping away from us again."

"Explaining?" Sera stepped forward. "About what?"

Now Sera felt Dak tensing at her side. "Has the SQ done something to her parents?" he asked.

"Oh, so you kids don't know the truth?" Tilda's laugh turned dark and sinister. "Sera, your parents *are* SQ! They work for me!"

"No!" It was everything Sera could do to keep from attacking Tilda in that moment. "You're lying!"

The voices of the SQ agents entering Dak's backyard carried into the lab. Soon, there would be no escape.

"You let my parents go!" Sera cried.

"No, Sera, we have to go," Dak said.

Sera turned to look at him, then felt Tilda's hand on her arm, pulling her back. Dak lunged for the woman, knocking her down.

"The SQuare!" Sera yelled. It was still in Tilda's right hand, waving wildly in the air.

Dak put one hand on the Infinity Ring, and then stretched enough to grab the SQuare with his other. He wrenched it from Tilda's grip and

said, “Get us outta here!”

At that moment, the doorway was filled with SQ thugs, yelling and pushing to be first through the door to capture the two young time travelers.

Sera had her thumb on the Infinity Ring’s button. “Hold on tight!” she yelled at Dak. Instantly, she felt time grab on to her gut and yank her into the warp. She opened her mouth, but realized someone else was already screaming. She looked over at Dak, whose face was vibrating so hard he’d shut his eyes as if to keep them from being sucked out of their sockets. But his mouth was clamped shut, too.

So who was screaming? Sera turned her head the other way.

Before they left, Tilda had been holding the SQuare with her right hand. Sera had noticed that. But she had never thought to check for where Tilda’s left hand had been.

It was on the Infinity Ring. Tilda was traveling with them through time.



## The Trout Memo

RIQ HAD come early to the Tower of London, where he was supposed to meet Dak and Sera. Maybe there was no point in coming early. No matter when they left, they would arrive at the precise time that Sera programmed into the Infinity Ring, and not one minute before.

This time and place weren't too bad for him to navigate on his own — after all, he'd made it to London without any trouble. But the truth was that he'd gotten used to having Sera and Dak with him on these adventures. They were all friends now; even Dak was, though neither of them would ever admit it. But it was something more. Dak and Sera had become like family to Riq. And he hated the thought that one day, they would finish these missions, save Earth from the Cataclysm, and then go home. Eventually, they would have to leave him behind for good.

But not today. Riq straightened his spine and paced for the twentieth time around the gatehouse that marked the entrance to the Tower of London. He had managed to get a job as a translator for the British Royal Navy. It was a civilian job, and the information he could access was so low-security that he could've put it on a billboard with flashing lights and no one would care. But it did get him inside the Admiralty building where the British spies worked, and that was a good start. Dak and Sera would have to be impressed with that move.



Where were they, already?

Somewhere in the distance, the chimes of Big Ben bonged out the change of the hour. One. Two. Three. Wasn't it time for them to show up? Six. Seven. Eight. It felt like each chime was longer than the last. Then, finally, ten and eleven.

Just as the final chime sounded, with sparks coming from nothing but empty air, Dak and Sera tumbled into existence. And then a third body rolled through. Tilda!

Riq actually stumbled backward. Were they crazy? Why would they bring Tilda here?

Dak and Tilda seemed to be fighting over a Square, but Tilda was also fighting with Sera to keep a hand on the Infinity Ring. Riq dove between all of them and earned himself a hard kick to his chest and someone's elbow in his eye. He pushed between them again until Sera finally rolled free with the Infinity Ring and Dak separated on the other side with the Square.

"You miserable brats!" Tilda growled. "Do you really think you have any chance of winning? Don't you know how strong we are here? This is where we took over the world!"

"What are we going to do with her?" Dak asked.

"We have to send her back, obviously," Sera said.

Riq didn't bother asking how they would do that. It'd be nearly impossible when none of them wanted to risk letting her anywhere near the Ring. That could be a fatal mistake.

He knew Tilda better than either of his friends did. As a child, he'd thought of her as a bogeyman — he'd already learned six languages before he could bring himself to say her name out loud. Then, as a young man, he'd studied her, as all Hystorians did. She was the most dangerous person alive, and vicious beyond words. Most Hystorians believed that the SQ would loosen its grip upon the world if only they could be convinced that the Cataclysm was real and that it was coming. But Tilda

was driving the entire planet toward the Cataclysm and it seemed like she wanted to step on the gas pedal to make it happen sooner.

Then Riq remembered something else about Tilda. She came from the future. A future that their actions had already changed.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked her.

Tilda hadn’t expected that. She stood there, recovering from her first warp through time, and blinked at him.

“Do you know who I am?!” He yelled the question this time, lunging forward, gripping her arms and shaking her.

“Oi, you there!” A policeman on the street behind them had noticed them surrounding Tilda, had heard him shouting at her. Riq could only imagine how this must look.

“Run!” Sera cried.

Dak started to protest that they couldn’t just leave Tilda, but Riq and Sera grabbed each of his arms and dragged him off. The officer pursued only a few steps before he returned to Tilda, who was doing a fabulous job of pretending she had been the victim.

“Yeah, helpless little super villain,” Riq muttered when he glanced behind them. “That man had better not look her straight in the eyes, or I bet he turns to stone.”

They ducked into a narrow alley to catch their breath, stow the Infinity Ring and SQuare, and brush themselves off.

Sera turned to Riq. “Do I even want to know what that was about?”

“Do I even want to know why in the world Tilda was with you?” he shot back. “What happened in the future?”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Sera snapped, then eyed Dak. “Not ever.”

Dak turned his obvious frustration back to Riq. “Maybe you’ve had it easy resting here for the last week, but for Sera and me that was three trips through time in just a few hours with an aerial bombing, a nice bombshell of news, *and* an SQ attack in between.”

Riq hadn't been relaxing these past few days, but it certainly wasn't anything compared to what Dak just described. Still, when Dak bent over with his hands on his knees, Riq did consider giving him a push to the ground. Just a little one.

"Sheesh, sorry I asked," Riq said.

"Sera, I get it. I do." Dak had turned to face Sera, and his voice was low, as if he didn't want Riq to hear. Riq kicked at the ground, but aimed his ears in their direction to absorb every word he could. "My parents made mistakes, too."

"Really? And are their mistakes going to destroy the world?"

"Well . . . no."

"Then you don't get it." She pushed past Dak and said, "Let's just figure out what to do now. Are we going back for Tilda? Well?" Dak didn't say anything and, with the mood Sera was in, Riq wasn't about to be the first to speak. Sera folded her arms. "Someone answer me!"

"Okay." Dak glanced back toward the Tower of London. "Maybe it's better if Tilda is stuck in this time for now. At least she's not at home causing even worse damage. Without an encyclopedic knowledge of history, how much harm could she do?"

"And you got a new SQuare," Riq said.

"Tilda had it, not the Hystorians." Dak handed it to Sera. "I think you'd better check it out before we trust anything it says."

Sera made a face, then took it and started pushing buttons. "It's password protected, just like the first one was. I think she must have been trying to hack into it when we dropped in on her." She typed in a word. "The password is *password*, just like before. It's booting up now."

Riq reached into his bag. "Since we have a few moments, maybe you can both change into some clothes that don't stand out so much. Sera, I have a special surprise for you."

Sera looked up from the SQuare and narrowed her eyes as if she wasn't sure whether he was serious or teasing her. Riq pulled two sets of

clothes from the bag, one in each hand.

He held up his right hand first. “Here we have a pretty polka-dot dress. Very nice.” But he saw that Sera was already eying his left hand and a smile was spreading across her face.

“Pants!” she cried. “Girls *finally* wear pants here?!”

“It was a growing trend in the forties,” Dak said. “Pants were more practical when so many women were going to work for the first time, to help the war effort.”

“Not now, Dak!” Forgetting her bad mood, Sera thrust the Square back onto her friend’s lap and yanked the pants and sweater from Riq’s hand, then ran deeper into the alley. “If anyone comes back here while I’m changing, I’ll hurt you. Pants!”

Riq chuckled to himself. “I knew she’d like that.”

Dak pointed to the other clothes still in Riq’s hands. “Good for her, but if you think I’m wearing the dress now, you’re crazy.”

Riq dropped the dress back into his bag and pulled out a pair of boys’ pants and a shirt for Dak. “They’re not fancy because everything is rationed here: clothes, food, supplies. But at least you’ll blend in better than you do now.” Once Dak had taken the clothes, Riq went back to his bag and pulled out some bread wrapped in brown paper. “I also figured you’d be hungry.”

“Starving is more like it.” Dak had a slice in his mouth even before finishing his sentence. “Is there any cheese?”

“Are you kidding?” Riq asked. “I had to scrub a grocer’s floor just to earn that!” He hesitated a moment, then quietly added, “Was she mad at me, after you two went to the future?”

“She was mad at both of us,” Dak said.

“But you know why I couldn’t — why I can’t . . . right?” Riq couldn’t even say the words to Dak. It was hard enough just to think about his future, much less have to explain it.

Dak only swallowed the food in his mouth and said, “It won’t take long for Sera to figure it out, too. We’re here, when you want to talk about it.”

That was good to know, but at least for now, Riq still hated even thinking about it. He put his problems to the back of his mind when Sera reappeared in her new outfit. She did a high kick in the air and laughed, then told Dak to get changed next.

Once they were all ready, they gathered around the Square. Words had appeared on the screen.

TROUT :

HDMS2W EEMWTO LAAIHL PDNMEF

“Trout? Like the fish?” Sera groaned. “And the rest is gibberish. It could mean anything.”

“And the number two is in the first word,” Riq said, shaking his head.

“Maybe Tilda uploaded false codes after all,” Dak said.

“I don’t think so.” Riq ran his finger across the screen. “This looks like Arin’s handiwork to me.”

“I was hoping it’d be written in Navajo,” Dak said. “You know, because this is World War Two and the Allies used the Navajo language for a code. It’s one of the only wartime codes in history that was never cracked by the enemy.” He looked up at Riq. “You know Navajo, right?”

Riq shrugged. “A little. But there’s a reason why Germany never cracked that code. It’s a spoken language so, at least in 1943, there’s no written record of it. Its details can change depending on the specific tribe, and a lot of words mean different things just by the way they’re pronounced.”

“So . . . that’s a no, right?” Dak said.

“I know a little,” Riq insisted. “At least enough that I was able to talk my way inside the Admiralty building as a translator. I only translate newspapers from other countries, so it’s hardly top secret, but I figured if we’re going to be spies, then we needed to get inside somehow.”

“Exciting!” Sera said. “You’re like James Bond with a day job.”

“It’s funny you’d say that,” Dak said. “Because Ian Fleming, who created the James Bond character in the 1950s, *did* work for the British Secret Intelligence Service in World War Two. In fact —” Dak drew in a breath and grabbed the SQuare. “Let me look at this!”

Sera scooted toward Riq to give Dak room for whatever thought was working its way through his brain.

“Anyway,” Riq said, “I’ve been working at the Admiralty — a lot of spy stuff happens there. Once they found out I knew so many languages, they’ve been very happy to have my help.”

“Trout!” Dak interrupted. When he caught Riq and Sera staring at him, he added, “A few years ago, right at the start of the war, Ian Fleming wrote a list of ideas for how Britain might trick Germany, just like a fisherman lures in a fish. It was called the Trout Memo.”

“But Ian Fleming only wrote spy novels,” Sera said. “This is real-life spying.”

“Maybe the reason he could write them is because he’d already lived them,” Riq pointed out.

“Exactly! Do you have anything to write with?” Dak asked. Riq handed over a loose sheet of paper and the pen that he’d been using for work. Dak started writing immediately, then after a minute scratched out what he’d done and started over.

“Anyway *again*,” Riq said, “maybe I could bring the SQuare’s code in and ask some of their code breakers to look at it.”

“For the love of mincemeat!” Sera said. “We can’t tell anyone about this code. Time traveling brings a whole new meaning to the term *top secret*.”

“Mincemeat!” Dak said. “Yes, Sera, you’re brilliant! So am I, by the way. We’re still waiting on Riq.”

Riq muttered something back to him in a language their translators didn’t pick up. In case Dak didn’t know he’d been insulted, Riq added, “That was Navajo. And trust me, I got the meaning of my words exactly right.”

To Riq’s surprise, Dak only chuckled and went back to his writing. After a moment he looked up and announced, “I know the code. I just lined up the first letter of each word, then the second letter of each word, and so on. Six words, four letters each.”

Sera and Riq looked to Dak’s chicken scratch.

*HELP DEAD MMAN SWIM 2THE WOLF*

“Oh, good,” Sera said. “That clarifies everything.”

“You’ve made a mistake,” Riq said, then chuckled. “What’s an M-man? A mailman? Marshmallow man?”

Sera nodded, and with a snort of laughter, added, “Maybe it’s the Muffin Man.”

But Dak only shook his head. “Here’s a tip for telling jokes, dudes. They’re always better if they’re funny.” Then he stood and stuffed the Square into his pants. “The M-man is real, and it’s the key to the Allies winning this war. C’mon, we’ve got work to do!”



## Mincemeat Man

DAK WASN'T sure where he was going, only that he had so many ideas turning in his head that he needed to move, just to keep things flowing. Riq and Sera were on either side of him, and as they walked, he tried to explain the code.

“Hitler’s first name, Adolf, means *wolf*. He used to call himself that sometimes, like a nickname.”

“Charming,” Sera muttered.

“And we have to help a dead guy swim to him?” Riq asked.

“Because I’m not going near any dead bodies.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere near Adolf Hitler!” Sera said.

Dak stopped and turned to Riq. “When you were inside the Admiralty this week, did anyone ever talk about Room 13?”

“No, but Duncan mentioned it during the bombing, so I found it, but I’m not allowed to go inside. Why? What’s in that room?”

“I sort of hoped that by now, you could tell me,” Dak said.

“What?” Riq asked. “So, you don’t know everything?”

Sera interrupted them. “Oh, for the love of mincemeat!”

Dak slapped a hand to his forehead as ideas moved like pinballs inside his brain. “‘For the love of mincemeat’ — exactly. You’re always saying that, Sera.”



She followed behind him as he started walking again. “I only say it when you two are fighting.”

Dak grinned. “Like I said, you’re *always* saying it. Anyway, I connected that with the word *Trout* in the code. M-man is Mincemeat Man. Mincemeat is a code of its own.”

“Like mincemeat pie?” Riq asked.

“It’s a code, not a dessert. I mean *mincemeat* as in slang for a dead man. You know, kaput, kicked the bucket, cashed out, toast. If you’re dead, you’re mincemeat.”

“And some dead guy is going to save the war?” Sera asked.

“That was the plan,” Dak said. “But in the history I learned, the plan didn’t work. In fact, it backfired in the worst possible way. The Allies never recovered.”

“Mincemeat!” Riq shouted. “Yes!”

“Could you say that louder?” Dak said. “The only way for everyone to know you’re a spy is if you SHOUT OUT YOUR PLANS!”

Riq glared at Dak, then lowered his voice and said, “Mincemeat — I’ve heard some people whispering about that. They got the body of a dead homeless person and dressed him up to look like a British officer. They call him Major Martin.”

“That’s him!” Dak stopped walking, this time because he realized he had no idea where he was going. Then he turned around to Riq. “The Allies are going to plant fake information about their next invasion on Major Martin. They want the Germans to discover it and believe what they’re reading. But that’s where they run into problems.”

“What problems?” Sera asked. “The plan seems simple enough.”

“To win this war, the Allies have to invade Sicily, right?” Dak’s thoughts were still racing, but he tried to say everything slowly so he wouldn’t have to explain it a second time. Or a tenth time, in Riq’s case. “So their fake information has to do two things: First, it has to convince the Germans that the Allies are *not* going to Sicily.”

“Even though they are,” Riq said.

Dak nodded. “Right. But the Germans are going to see the Allies preparing for an invasion, so they have to make them think their target is actually somewhere else.”

“Greece!” Riq said. “I heard people talking about Greece.”

“I get it!” Sera said. “So the Allies want Germany to think they’re invading someplace they’re not, *and* that they’re not invading somewhere they are.”

“Yeah,” Dak said. “Way to clarify that. Nice job.”

“I still don’t understand the problem,” Riq said.

“In the history we learned, Hitler did get Major Martin’s fake papers, but he never believed them. If Germany knows the story about invading Greece is a lie —”

“Then they know the story about *not* invading Sicily is a lie, too —” Sera said.

“So instead of tricking Germany, Mincemeat Man told them exactly where the Allies were going to attack!” Riq finished.

Dak folded his arms, satisfied with himself. “In our history — the wrong, SQ-twisted history — Sicily was a disaster for the Allies. The Nazis were ready for us, and we never recovered. The only way to fix things is to make sure the wolf — Adolf Hitler — believes Major Martin is a real British soldier carrying real plans for the invasion of Greece.”

“How do we do that?” Sera asked.

Dak eyed Riq. “For a start, you have to get us inside Room 13.”



## The Secrets of Room 13

RIQ SIGHED. Dak had asked to get inside Room 13 as if that were something simple. As if they could just walk into the Admiralty, open the door, and peek at some of the most top secret plans of World War II. Sure, anyone could do that!

Then Sera pointed out that this was exactly the kind of thing they had to do in order to influence the war from behind the scenes. Easy for her to say. Two kids who were caught sneaking around would just get kicked out of the building. But Riq was older than they were, and he had a job there that involved sensitive matters of national security. If he was caught, could they put him in military prison? Could he be tried as a traitor?

It wasn't a pleasant thought, but Riq knew that Dak was right. They had to get into that room!

It took Riq most of the afternoon to wander the corridors of the Admiralty and its connecting buildings until he found an old, unguarded room in the basement with a window large enough for Dak and Sera to squeeze through. It was a good thing that *he* didn't have to come and go this way, but they were a little shorter and should be able to fit.

That was where he waited for them that night. What had started as a drizzle an hour before had turned into a heavy downpour. At any other

time, that would've been a problem, but tonight, it was very good news. The rain would help camouflage Dak and Sera from the soldiers who patrolled the area, and hopefully lower the soldiers' guards a bit. Even so, he breathed a huge sigh of relief when the secret tap they'd devised came to the windowpane.

Riq inched the window open, which took more effort than he had expected. Who knew how many months or years — or decades — had passed since it was last opened?

A soaked Sera crawled through first, then Dak followed. They dripped on the floor so much it was as if they had brought the rainstorm inside with them.

“Next time, I'll stay in the warm building while you sneak through the rain,” Dak told Riq through chattering teeth.

Riq had a nice response ready, but decided to save it for later. At least until Dak looked less like a wet puppy.

He started to close the window, but Sera said, “We should leave it open, in case we need to make a quick escape.”

“Good idea.” Riq frowned at the water now puddled on the floor, but decided it would dry long before anyone happened upon it. “Let's get this done.”

He opened the door to the hallway, and then froze, certain he had heard a shuffle in the bushes outside the window.

Dak looked out, but only shrugged his shoulders. “Nobody except us is crazy enough to be out on a night like this. Must be the wind.”

“C'mon, then.” Riq led them into a narrow and dark hallway with low ceilings and worn paint. Outside, the rain seemed to have picked up speed. The pelter of drops echoed through the hallway, which masked any sound they might make, but it also made Riq nervous. It concealed any sound from an oncoming guard on his rounds, too.

Room 13 was marked clearly, but for a place that held such powerful secrets, it didn't seem to be anything special. Maybe that was the idea. If

a German spy got in here, the last place he'd think to look for top secret plans was behind an ordinary door in a narrow basement.

Dak stepped forward and tried the door handle. "It's locked."

Sera shoved a hand in her pocket and pulled out some slim pieces of metal. "No worries. I've gotten pretty good at picking locks by now."

"Excellent," Riq said.

Sera went down on her knees and stuck the metal pieces inside the handle. While she did, Riq explained to Dak how the few men and women who worked inside this room mostly kept to themselves and seemed very serious about their jobs. "But they're still just regular people," he whispered. "Everyday people trying to stop a really bad guy."

"Real spies don't have all the cool gadgets you see in the movies," Dak said, watching Sera struggle with the lock. "Though I sure wish we had a sonic screwdriver right about now."

Riq wasn't sure he got the reference, but he raised an eyebrow knowingly.

Sera continued fiddling for several minutes, all the time muttering to herself about the feel of the tumblers. Riq and Dak huddled in close to watch, and neither of them moved when she told them to back off.

"I can't . . ." she said. "This won't . . ." And then, halfway through a sentence that began "We'll never —" her eyes lit up and she exclaimed, "That did it!"

The lock clicked. Sera rotated it and pushed. "Let's go in," she whispered.

"Why don't we all go inside?" someone behind them said in an English accent.

All three kids turned, and sighed in unison. A tall man with wavy brown hair, prominent cheekbones, and bushy eyebrows was motioning them inside Room 13.

Once inside, he turned on the lights, then shut and locked the door behind him. Sera stood between the two boys, holding each of their hands. Or rather, locking their hands in a death grip. Riq would've pulled away, just to preserve some blood flow in his fingers, but Sera looked like she needed his support.

Okay, he was scared, too.

"Who are you?" Dak asked.

"Call me Anton." Then he chuckled. "I've always wanted to get inside the Admiralty, but I never thought three kids would make it so easy for me."

"So you're a spy?" Sera asked.

"I suppose you could say that." His eyes rested on Sera's sack, the one with the Infinity Ring inside, and Riq leaned closer to her to block Anton's view of it. Anton continued, "But I do not work for Britain or for Germany. They're too caught up in their war to see the bigger things happening in this world."

Riq jutted out his chin. "We don't care whose side you're on. We're not here to fight. We don't have anything to do with this war."

Anton's smile only widened. "Maybe not *this* war. But our war is even bigger, eh, time travelers?" He chuckled again. "That's right. We know what you look like now. There is no safe place for you in this era."

Riq's heart sank, and Sera squeezed his hand tighter, if that was possible. He cut a glance toward Dak and saw that the younger boy's eyes were fixed on some papers on a nearby desk. Riq suppressed a groan. Even if the secrets of the universe were on those papers, it wasn't the best time for Dak to be distracted.

"Do you have kids, Anton?" Sera asked.

The man looked her way. "What?"

Sera shrugged. "You're wearing a wedding band, and it's tarnished, so I bet you've been married a long time. Do you and your wife have any kids?"

“They live very happily here in London. Why? What’s it to you?”

“It’s nothing to me. Your kids are going to be fine,” Sera said.

“Because the SQ does win here. Big congratulations for that, by the way. You’re about to get a lot of power and control, and pretty soon your children will have everything they want. But their children are going to have a lot to worry about. And your great-grandchildren — the ones who’ll be around in the time we come from — they won’t do so well at all.”

“Why not?”

Sera continued. “The SQ is going to destroy the world — literally destroy it. I’ve been there. I’ve seen it for myself. If you don’t let us go free, your grandchildren will face one disaster after another and your great-grandchildren will not survive to adulthood.”

Anton’s eyes darted from one kid to the other. “You’re lying.”

Riq shook his head. “You’re a Time Warden, so we know what your orders are. But we are the last hope for your family. What you choose to do right now can either save them, or destroy them.”

Anton hesitated for a moment, and then frowned. “You’re lying. The SQ will *save* this world. In time we will control everything and everyone, and then there will be no more war or starvation or catastrophe. The woman in red has promised it.”

Dak snorted, then went back to reading the paper.

Anton looked offended that his speech had failed to impress any of them. He stepped closer to Dak to get his attention. “I’m deciding whether to kill you and your friends. You might at least listen to me.”

“Huh?” Dak looked up. “Sorry, I know you’re under orders, but . . . wow.” And his voice trailed off again as his focus wandered back to the papers.

Anton withdrew a pocketknife from his pants and opened the blade. “Tell you what. You all come with me, nice and quiet, and I’ll take you back to Tilda. She’ll know what to do with you.”

“Hold on,” Dak said. “I’ll be finished in a minute.”

“You’ll come with me now!” Anton advanced with the blade angled toward Dak. “Or else.”

“You wouldn’t be threatening me if you knew how brilliant this plan is,” Dak said. “But it’s already in motion.”

“What is?” Getting no response, Anton strode over to Dak and shoved him aside to look at the papers for himself. When he did, Dak picked up the heavy telephone from the desk and swung it at Anton’s head. The man tumbled to the ground, unconscious.

“That was a great idea!” Sera said. “Getting him to look at the papers so you could attack him.”

“That wasn’t my plan,” Dak said. “I really was reading the papers. I only thought of the telephone after he pushed me.”

“So, what’s on them?” Riq asked.

“We’re almost out of time. They’ve already set sail with Major Martin’s body, which means it’ll wash up on the shores of Spain any day now.”

“Why Spain?” Sera asked. “Why not send him directly to Italy or Germany?”

“That would be too obvious,” Riq said.

“Spain is the perfect choice,” Dak said. “Officially, they’re a neutral country in the war. But unofficially, a lot of people in the Spanish government are on Germany’s side.”

“So we have to hope the people who get Martin’s body support Germany and slip them the phony plans,” Sera said.

“I think I know what we need to do about Mincemeat Man,” Dak said, “but we’re going to have to split up.”

Behind them, Anton began to stir. “Tell us about it later,” Riq said. “Let’s drag this guy away from the top secret intelligence and dump him in some bushes before he wakes up!”





## Split Up

THE NEXT morning, Dak stood with Sera and Riq at the ferry docks near London. He had explained to them everything he'd read the night before while in the Admiralty, but neither of them seemed too excited about the jobs ahead.

Riq handed scraps of paper to Dak and Sera with a phone number written on them. "That's for a pay phone near the Admiralty," he said. "Memorize the number, then destroy the paper, because we're spies now. I'll be at that phone every night at nine o'clock my time. Call once, then hang up, then call again. That's how I'll know it's one of you."

Sera shoved her paper into her pocket. "We'll both call every night. I don't like splitting up."

"Me neither," Riq said. "If the body is already on its way to Spain, I won't do much good here."

"If something goes wrong, we need someone here in London to warn the officials," Dak said. "You already have a job at the Admiralty, so it makes sense to keep you here, just in case."

"But what if Anton comes back?" Sera asked. "Or someone like him? I knew there would be SQ among the Axis powers. But the British are fighting for their freedom and survival. How can Anton really believe he's doing the right thing by supporting the SQ over the Allies?"

“Tilda lied to him,” Dak said. “Just like the SQ lies to everyone else. She’s made him believe that he’s saving Earth from the Cataclysm.”

“When they’re the ones causing it,” Riq added. “Don’t worry about Anton. I’m sure it’ll take him a few days to see straight again. You two just get your jobs done.”

“I’ll make sure Spain believes Major Martin is a British officer who drowned a few days ago in the ocean,” Sera said. “Not a homeless man who died from rat poison a few months ago.”

“I’ll bet you know more about science than any of those coroners,” Dak said confidently. “Fight science with science.”

Sera bit her lip. “Riq and I have jobs that make sense. But why do you have to go to Germany?”

Dak didn’t want to go behind enemy lines. But even if Riq and Sera did their jobs perfectly, none of it mattered unless Germany believed Martin’s papers were real. Somehow, Dak had to get to Hitler.

“He was brutal,” Sera said. “If Hitler suspects you’re there as a spy —”

“Just do your parts right and maybe I won’t have to do anything,” Dak said quickly. “Mincemeat Man was a good plan, but everything had to fall in place perfectly for the plan to work.”

“And if it doesn’t, Hitler could have you sent to the concentration camps,” Sera said. “Or even killed.”

“I’m already dealing with the Cataclysm. If I can face that, then I can deal with Hitler.” Dak shrugged, then a mischievous smile crossed his face. “That sounded pretty brave, right? We should remember that, for the book they write about me one day.”

“You’d better go before I lose my lunch,” Riq told Dak. “Besides, you don’t want to miss your boat.”

“You first,” Dak said to Sera. She was going to use the Infinity Ring to warp to the morgue in Huelva, Spain, where Major Martin’s body was

expected to be taken. Traveling there by boat and across land could take a week or more, which would be too late.

Sera nodded and ducked into a thicket of trees nearby. She pulled the Infinity Ring from its bag, crouched low, and then pushed the button that would send her away.

Dak and Riq watched her go, and Dak was surprised to feel himself already missing her. It wasn't that he liked her, or at least, he didn't *like her* in that way, but things were never quite right when she was gone.

"Your turn," Riq said. "Is everything set?"

Dak hoped so. The easiest way to get into Germany was on a shipping barge. It had come from a neutral country and was only making stops at ports for businesses unconnected to the war. Dak had spent the entire morning talking a deck supervisor's ear off until he finally said Dak could have a job swabbing decks if he would just promise to stop talking.

"I'll try to call you tonight, from wherever I am," Dak said.

He started to walk off, then Riq said, "Quick question: plans like this in history . . . how often have they worked?"

Dak frowned back at him. "Something this big? Almost never."

With that, he waved good-bye to Riq and looked back at the area where Sera had disappeared, then ran up the gangplank and onto the ship. Once on board, he gazed over the railings of the ship . . . and then quickly ducked down low.

Tilda was on the dock, her head darting around like a pigeon's as she scanned the area. She was searching for him and Sera and Riq, no doubt. Carefully, Dak peeked back over the railing and groaned. Riq wasn't far from her, still watching Dak's ship as it sailed away. He was completely unaware of Tilda.

Tilda turned to a woman nearby to ask a question, and the woman looked Tilda over with clear disapproval before finally shaking her head

and walking away. Only then did Dak pay more attention to her appearance.

She had on a tight red skirt and a shiny black jacket with a bright ruby pin on the lapel. It was totally out of place for the time period, and practically screamed for everyone to notice her. With her red hair pulled up high on her head, she almost looked like a burning ember of fire. In fact, in many ways, Tilda reminded Dak of fire: Get too close, and you'd get burned.

Still on the shore, Riq gave Dak a final wave good-bye, then started to walk off. Tilda bobbed her head in Riq's direction, but Dak didn't think she had spotted him. Or had she? The ship was far from shore now. All Dak could hope was that Tilda was looking for three kids, and ignoring the single boy walking away.

By that time, the deck captain had begun shouting orders, and he put Dak to work cleaning the railings. It kept him busy, and that was better. The work helped keep his mind off of Tilda and the Cataclysm, the world war, and the fact that he was heading straight into the wolf's lair.

He scrubbed decks for nearly the entire day at sea, but was given a warm meal with the other crewmen that evening, shortly before the captain announced that the ship would soon be docking in Germany.

When the boat came into port, Dak ditched his mop and went down to ask if there were any boxes he could unload.

A crewman pointed to a small crate in the corner. "Those are goblets specially ordered in for Hitler," he said. "Carry them if you dare, but if you drop them, it'll be your head. Someone will be waiting for them on the dock."

Dak picked up the wood crate, which was heavier than it looked. Why couldn't people have discovered shipping in cardboard yet? That would've saved him a few pounds. But he kept it balanced in his arms as he walked across the gangplank and onto the docks.

“Are those the goblets?” The woman who asked was older, with stooped shoulders and graying hair. The wrinkles on her face were long and deep, but when she smiled, her eyes seemed warm and energetic.

“Yes.” Dak felt relieved to hear his translator pick up the German language. It was the first time since he’d landed in 1943 that he’d needed to speak in a language other than his own.

“None of them had better be broken. They’re for the Führer, you know.”

“You work for Hitler, then?” Dak asked.

“I do kitchen work at a bunker in Berlin. Nothing more.” She held out her arms. “Well, hand them over.”

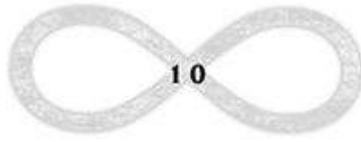
“The box is heavier than it looks,” Dak said. “I’m worried you might drop them.”

“And if I let you carry them for me, what would you want in return?” the woman asked.

“Just a ride to Berlin,” Dak said.

She smiled. “It’s a long drive. I’d enjoy the company. But you’ll have to do more than carry this box to my car. I’ll also expect you to do all the unloading once we’ve arrived. If you work hard enough, maybe I can hire you. We need a good kitchen boy.”

“It’s a deal.” Dak was quick to agree before this opportunity passed him by. He wouldn’t be anywhere near a phone tonight to call Riq, but this was more important. For better or worse, he had just found his way into the heart of enemy territory.



## **Spy Class with Clauss**

SERA ARRIVED at her coordinates in Spain with a pulsing migraine and with her body feeling as if it had not quite come back together. She wiggled her fingers to make sure they were still there, and was rewarded with sensations of hot electrical currents traveling from them along her arms and into her chest. *Forget the Cataclysm*, she thought. Time travel would destroy them much sooner.

Remembering the ways she had managed these feelings before, Sera backed against the nearest wall and forced herself to breathe, to just draw in a full gulp of air, and release it again. Slowly, the pain faded, but she promised herself that she would not use the Infinity Ring again until she absolutely had to. She doubted her body could take much more.

It turned out she had unknowingly backed up against just the right wall. The morgue entrance was only a few yards to one side, and from the other direction and around the corner, she could hear two men arguing. She flattened herself against the plaster and listened. With any luck, nobody would notice her there.

“You must let me see that body!” a man said. Even without the translator, Sera knew he was speaking in Spanish, but his accent was German. She hadn’t realized there would be any Nazis here, but it seemed like a safe bet now.

The person who answered had a Spanish accent. “Clauss, the man inside this morgue is a dead British officer. You are a German — an enemy to that man. Why would I let you see him?”

Clauss lowered his voice and his tone became more desperate. “Doctor, you don’t understand. I am quite well connected in Germany. There are people in my country who would do anything . . . *anything* . . . to get their hands on the dead officer’s briefcase. I will pay you well if you only let me see what it contains!”

“I don’t want your money, Clauss,” the doctor replied. “Now you must excuse me. There are people inside who are waiting to begin.” He rounded the corner with Clauss on his heels, then they both stopped when they saw Sera.

“Are you all right?” The doctor put the back of his hand against her forehead to check her temperature. Little did he know the reason for the sweat on her brow and flushed cheeks was worse than a simple flu.

Sera nodded calmly, but on the inside her pulse was racing. She had heard enough of their conversation to know that her real mission was more than just convincing Spain to accept Major Martin’s fake cause of death. She had to convince Clauss, too.

“I couldn’t help but overhear you just now. And I can help with the postmortem,” she said.

“How?” The doctor’s eyes narrowed. “A girl of your age has done a postmortem examination before?”

“Well . . . no.” But Sera had read about them, and even sat in once on an autopsy performed at a local hospital, just for fun. But she hadn’t gotten that close to the body and half the time her view was blocked by the doctors doing the procedure. “My name is Sera, and I’m very good with science. I can hand you tools, and record your observations. I know anatomy and chemistry, and I’m a quick learner.”

The doctor nodded. “All right. I could use another set of hands, *if* you know when to stay out of our way. Come on in.”

The doctor went inside, but Clauss grabbed Sera's arm and pulled her back. He was so thin he almost looked unhealthy, and had a high forehead and a face that looked as if it had been cut from stone. Not a single hair on his head moved in the light breeze. Either he used gallons of gel each day, or else his hair was cut from stone, too.

"Tell me everything you see in there," he said. "I'll pay you well for any information."

Sera shook him off. "How much?" Clauss wasn't likely to trust her as a spy. But he obviously trusted in the power of a good bribe.

He withdrew a thick wad of money from his pocket and flipped through it. "That depends on what you tell me."

Sera felt like running away, or yelling, or doing nearly anything other than helping this man. But she was a spy now, and this was her one chance to convince Clauss she was on his side. She whispered, "If you meet me after the examination, I'll tell you everything I see."

Clauss studied her a moment, then leaned in and pinched her cheeks. "I'll pay you for information I can use," he said. "But if I find out you are lying, or holding back a single detail, then you are the one who will pay."

Sera wormed from his grip, then backed away from his threats and into the morgue. There were others in the room besides the doctor. A man in a British uniform stood there looking bored — did he know about Mincemeat Man, or was he just as confused as everyone else? Next to him was a man in a Spanish uniform who was holding a wet briefcase — Martin's, no doubt. He asked if they could hurry up, because he had already missed lunch. The doctor was working with a young attendant, and Sera thought she saw a resemblance between them — his son, perhaps? There was an American soldier, too, sitting in the corner and looking like he was about to be sick from the horrid smell in the room. None of them paid Sera much attention, except the doctor who handed her a clipboard and told her to write down everything he dictated.



And, of course, lying flat on a table was the guest of honor: Major Martin. Mincemeat Man, who was worse than dead. He looked like a full-on zombie, with sunken eyes, yellow skin, and knotted hands. Right then and there, Sera decided that she would grow up to be a physicist or a botanist or any scientist that didn't deal with dead bodies. Because this was just gross!

The attendant started by emptying Martin's pockets. Most of what he found was useless — just soggy old receipts, some cash, stamps, and two ticket stubs from a theater. Sera wondered why anyone had bothered to put all that into his pockets — none of it had anything to do with the fake plans.

But then she realized it wasn't about convincing the Germans that the plans were real. It was about making the Germans believe *Major Martin* was real. If they thought Martin was a real British officer, they'd automatically believe his plans. Major Martin wasn't supposed to be some unfortunate homeless person who'd been holed up in a freezer for the past three months. He was supposed to have been alive only a few days ago, doing the things living people did. All that stuff in his pockets was genius.

Next, the Spanish officer placed the briefcase on a table and unlocked it with an attached set of keys. Seawater dripped back onto the papers inside as it was opened, but that didn't matter — they were already plenty wet. On top of everything were a handful of envelopes with red wax seals over them. They looked very official, like secret military plans. Sera pictured Clauss outside, drooling in his desperation to know what was in those envelopes.

After loosely sifting through the contents, the Spanish officer shut the briefcase and held it out to the British man. "You'll be wanting this back, no doubt."

Sera looked at the two of them, wondering what would happen next. Of course he should take the briefcase. It came from a British soldier and

should be returned to one, especially if it contained top secret information. The British officer's eyes widened, as if he wasn't sure what to say. Only a bumbling fool would refuse to take his country's top secret information back, but if he did, Mincemeat Man was finished.

The British officer decided to play the role of bumbling fool. "Well, your superior might not like that," he finally said. "So perhaps you should deliver it to him, and then bring it back to me, following the official route."

The Spanish officer only shrugged, gathered up the items that had been in Martin's pockets, and left. The American followed. His face had gotten greener and greener with the smell, and once outside, he'd probably run for the nearest bush.

With that, the doctor requested tools to begin the autopsy. Sera pressed in closer and reminded herself *again* that she was here not only as a scientist, but also as a spy. And spies could not get sick, no matter how disgusting this was.

But when he cut into the body, her understanding of gross went to an entirely new level. The insides were rotted and watery. Sera knew how long this body had been frozen, and how far the body would decompose in that time. But she couldn't let the doctor think it had been more than a few days.

"So much decomposition?" he wondered aloud. "Strange."

"Maybe it's the seawater," Sera offered. If Martin had drowned at sea, the doctor would expect to find seawater in his lungs. And seawater was hard on a human body. "The seawater and the heat," she added.

"And the skin is quite discolored," he said.

"Probably the effects from lack of air underwater," Sera said. It wasn't that. The man had actually died from eating rat poison, which contained high levels of phosphorous. That's what had turned his skin yellow. But she hoped the doctor wouldn't think too long or hard about it.

To her, the signs that Martin hadn't died at sea were so obvious. But the doctor had no reason to suspect it was anything else, so she hoped he'd keep trying to find ways to explain Martin's condition that were consistent for a drowning.

Finally, the doctor wiped his brow with the back of his arm. "It's quite warm for an autopsy, don't you agree?"

"The smell is . . . a bit much," the British officer replied.

"To be thorough, I need more time."

The doctor wasn't stupid, and that worried Sera. With more time, he was bound to realize Martin had been dead long before he was dumped into the sea. And if he figured that out, word would get back to the Nazis no matter what Sera told Clauss. She spoke quickly. "Of course, this heat will continue to degrade the body, even worse than what's already happened since he was pulled ashore. Very soon, it will be hard to know anything for sure."

"True. You are a bright girl." The doctor pursed his lips, then ordered his assistant to help him move the body into a wood coffin behind them. "Let the death certificate state that this is a drowning victim, in the water for eight to ten days."

"Very good," the British officer said, probably too quickly. He must know about the plan, Sera thought, or at least, enough to know his role in this morgue today.

Before the lid went on, the doctor placed a hand on the coffin. "Still, there are questions that should be answered. A drowning victim is always, er, nibbled on by the fish. I see none of that here. Seawater should have made his hair brittle and stiff. But it is not. Even his clothes are in better condition than I would have expected for a man floating this long in the water."

As if sensing she was on his side, the British officer locked eyes with Sera. She looked up at the doctor. "These are good questions. I'm sure

you'll want others to come and check your work. The Germans, perhaps.”

The doctor frowned down at her. No, he didn't want the Germans checking his work any more than he wanted to be hung upside down and subjected to tickle torture. “It is death by drowning,” the doctor said firmly. “That is my final conclusion. His body will be returned immediately to the British for burial.”

Sera nodded and recorded his findings on her clipboard, but inside she was beaming. Operation Fix Mincemeat Man had just cleared its first hurdle.



## **Riq's Choice**

THE FOLLOWING day, after Riq had finished his assigned work, he ate his lunch near a telegraph machine so he could watch the messages being sent from Britain to various government officials in Spain. He only saw a few of them, but he could tell how carefully worded the messages were. They had to sound eager to get the body back, but not too eager. And of course, they couldn't actually get the body back until Spain had control of the documents. Everyone who seemed to know about the plan was playing it cool, but he knew better. If this went badly, the Allies wouldn't recover during this war. Or ever recover, for that matter.

But that night at nine o'clock, he settled in near the pay phone, waiting for calls from Dak and Sera. Riq stared harder at the phone as if that would somehow make it ring. He hadn't heard from either of them their first night apart, but he hoped to hear something soon. Sera's part of the plan was crucial and he was going crazy wondering if she'd had any luck. Even worse was knowing that Dak was somewhere behind enemy lines.

Finally, the phone rang once and stopped. After a few seconds, it rang again. That was the signal. It was either Dak or Sera calling him.

Footsteps echoed on the quiet street behind him and Riq kept his head down. There were many officers in this area and he didn't need to

get their attention now. All he wanted was to answer the phone.

“You there,” a man said, addressing Riq. “Why are you out so late? Causing trouble?”

“No, sir,” Riq answered.

“That’s too bad,” a woman’s voice said. “Because we are.”

Even before he turned around, Riq knew who had come. That was Tilda’s voice, cold and harsh. She made porcupines seem cuddly. Riq’s legs turned to mush, and he had to force himself to turn. Tilda stood between two sloppy and unshaven men who were roughly the size of small mountains. Aside from their British uniforms, they looked nothing like soldiers. Although he couldn’t see weapons in their hands, he didn’t doubt for a minute that they had them.

“Answer that phone,” Tilda ordered. “It’s for you, right?”

Riq had almost forgotten it was still ringing, and couldn’t understand why the caller hadn’t given up already. Maybe they were in trouble, or needed help. But as he stared into the black eyes of Tilda and her friends, Riq began to think nobody needed more help at the moment than him.

“Pick up the phone,” Tilda repeated. “And if you say anything I don’t like, you’re going to regret it.”

Riq picked up the phone and, instantly, Tilda was in the phone box at his side, her ear pressed to the outside of the receiver for whatever she could hear.

“Riq!” Dak’s voice came through with a lot of static and sounded far away. “Riq, is that you?”

“Y-yes,” Riq stammered.

“What took you so long to answer? Were you napping while Sera and I had the dangerous jobs?”

Riq gritted his teeth. Sometimes he really hated that kid. “I’ve got problems here, too, you know.”

“Well, unless your problem is that wicked witch of the future, it’s not worse than mine,” Dak said, unknowingly earning Riq a jab in the ribs

with Tilda's pointy elbow. "You won't believe where I am."

"I'm sure I won't," Riq said. "So there's really no reason to tell me." He bit into his last words as Tilda kicked him in the shin.

Beside him, Tilda motioned that Riq should keep Dak talking. Maybe she didn't know that kid never needed any encouragement to run his mouth.

"Are you okay?" Dak asked. "You sound —"

"Tired," Riq finished. "And I bet you are, too, since you had to travel all the way to Switzerland today."

"What? No, I'm not in Switzerland. You know I went to —"

"Quietville." If Dak couldn't catch the subtle cues, Riq would try a more obvious one. "You're at the Keep Your Mouth Closed for Once Hotel."

"Hitler's headquarters in Berlin. They gave me a job — oh!" Then Dak realized what Riq had just said. "Oh, uh, I mean —"

Finally, it seemed that Tilda had heard enough. She ducked out of the phone box and motioned at her thugs, who grabbed Riq's arms and ripped him away from the phone. One of them clamped a hand over his mouth while the other pulled his arms behind his back and held them there.

"Hello?" Dak's voice could be heard coming from the receiver, dangling by its cord. "Hel-lo!"

Tilda returned to the booth, picked up the phone, and glared at Riq for a moment before she spoke into the receiver. "You know my voice, don't you, Dak?" Her oily grin widened. "Good. Now, do you want your friend to die?"

*It would be okay if I did,* Riq thought, and he hoped Dak would refuse to bargain for his life. Riq knew he was running out of his own time line pretty fast — and missing the last few slides through history wouldn't make that much of a difference.

But Dak must've answered no, because Tilda's smirk widened again and she said, "Then you will tell me where the Infinity Ring is."

Riq tried to yell out for Dak not to say anything, but the hand was still covering his mouth. He sat helplessly as Tilda listened to whatever Dak said.

"You have the time-travel device?" Tilda's tone was doubtful. "An object that could literally hand control of the entire world to Adolf Hitler, and you brought it with you to Germany?"

Whatever Dak said in answer, Tilda wasn't buying it. "I think you're lying," she said. "I think you're trying to protect your friends. Who has it, Riq or Sera?"

Riq heard Dak protesting when Tilda pulled the phone away from her ear, but her eyes only narrowed in on his. "You remember my friend Anton, correct? He spies on the British when needed, and spies on the Germans equally well."

*A triple spy*, Riq thought. One who had access to both sides of the war, but was loyal only to the SQ.

Tilda added, "Anton and another of our agents, Cleo, have access to that same headquarters. I expect Anton has made his way back to Germany by now."

Riq's teeth were clenched so tightly together that he could barely speak. "So?"

"I want you to tell me if Dak has the Infinity Ring. Because if he does, then my next call will be to Anton and Cleo. By tomorrow morning, Dak will be nothing but a distant memory. So, tell me, Riq, does Dak have the Infinity Ring?"

Riq closed his eyes to think. Dak didn't have the Infinity Ring, so nothing was really gained by lying to Tilda. And he couldn't let her make that call to Berlin and endanger Dak. But what could he possibly say to buy them all some more time?



He shook his head and then opened his eyes. “Dak doesn’t have the Ring.”

“Then who does?”

Riq tried to keep his voice even and to look straight at Tilda. “None of us have it. The Hystorian of this time period has it.”

“Nonsense,” Tilda said. “The only Hystorian in this area was killed in an air raid in Aberdeen.” She smiled evilly. “I’m from the future, too, remember? You’ve lost your one advantage.” She held the phone back up to her ear and said, “Listen carefully, Dak, because even though you just tried lying to me, what I’m about to tell you is the exact truth. I’ve got Riq, and if you do not tell me where the Ring is this moment, you will never see him alive again.”

There was a long silence while Riq strained to hear Dak’s response on the phone. But he couldn’t hear anything and only knew Dak had answered when Tilda hung up the phone and turned to her thugs. “The girl has it and she’s somewhere in Spain. We need to know exactly where she is.”

“This kid can tell us.”

Riq shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “She typed in the coordinates, and I don’t know them.”

“Will she call?” Tilda asked. Without Riq’s help, she answered her own question. “Of course she will. We just have to be patient and wait for her to get in touch.”

“What about him?” one of the thugs asked, gesturing at Riq.

“We have to keep him alive, for now,” Tilda said. “We might still need his help to get that Ring.”

It was a bad situation. All right, Riq admitted to himself, it was a *terrible* situation, but at least Dak was safe, and with any luck he might even find some way to warn Sera.

Or, that was what he thought before Tilda picked up the telephone once more and started dialing.

“Who are you calling now?” the other thug asked.

“Anton and Cleo, our friends in Berlin,” Tilda said. “Maybe we still need Riq alive, but we don’t need Dak.”



## **Dodging the SQ**

DAK WAS in a full-blown panic by the time Tilda hung up on him. She had Riq, and who knew what she'd do to him if things didn't go her way? She also knew that Sera had the Infinity Ring. The only reason he didn't wonder if things could get any worse is because he already knew the answer: Even now, things could always get worse.

He needed to help both Sera and Riq, but didn't have a single idea for how to begin. Obviously, it wouldn't do any good to call Riq back, and he had no way to contact Sera, or any money to get from Berlin all the way to Spain.

Dak returned to the kitchen and slumped against a wall while he tried to force himself to keep thinking. He had to calm down, because if he panicked any worse, he'd do something crazy like rip off all his clothes and start running in circles, screaming.

Riq was in the most immediate danger. But Tilda would probably keep him alive until she had the Infinity Ring. Riq was smart and strong, and likely had a trick or two up his sleeve. If there was any chance to escape, Riq would find it. And then Riq could warn Sera.

Dak forced his fists to unclench. That wasn't much to base his hope on, but it was better than nothing. For now, the only thing Dak could do

was to try to wedge his way closer to Hitler and make sure that once the fake plans from Mincemeat came through, Hitler would believe them.

Dak half-smiled. *Yeah, just as easy as mincemeat pie.*

Except that there were a few complications. First, Hitler only took advice from the small group of people he trusted. That group didn't include Dak. Second, only a few people ever got close to Hitler at all, and as far as Dak knew, none of them were eleven years old. And third, if Dak ever did get close to Hitler, he could never pretend to be on Hitler's side long enough to convince him of anything. The man was too evil, too cruel. Dak knew *that* much pretending just wasn't in him.

At some point, Dak must've fallen asleep against the wall because he awoke to the sound of a man and woman in the hallway just outside the kitchen. Even through the walls, he recognized Anton's voice. But it now bore a German accent.

"Tilda said the boy was here!" At that, Dak's eyes sprung fully open. Instantly, he was wide awake. Wide awake and trapped.

"You know the Führer would not want us roaming around at night," a woman's voice said. "We can look for the boy in the morning."

At one point while he had been on the phone with Tilda, Dak had thought he heard her threaten to send SQ agents after him here in Berlin. But the static had been so thick on the phone, he had hoped he heard wrong. Apparently not. He looked around for a place to hide, but where was he supposed to go? A cupboard?

"Who are you more afraid of?" Anton asked. "Tilda or the Führer?"

Dak asked himself the same question. It was sort of like asking which was the better way to die: by lightning or by getting thrown off a cliff. Neither option sounded particularly fun, and both ended the same way.

"She said that if we don't catch him, this boy could destroy the SQ." Anton paused while some closets were opened, searched, and shut again. "Maybe we shouldn't do this. Back at the Admiralty, one of the kids –

the girl – told me she had been to the future, and that everything gets destroyed. I’m worried, Cleo. What if we’re wrong?”

Cleo scoffed at that. “Do you trust three kids more than Tilda, one of our own? She said she can stop the Cataclysm and I believe her. And if we help her, she will reward us well once she’s in control. Now let’s find the boy, and then go after the others.”

“And if the Führer catches us, he will say we are spying against him and have us arrested!” In his nervousness, Anton’s voice was just a touch too loud.

“Be quiet, or we *will* be caught,” Cleo said. “Let’s check the kitchen. If he’s not there, we can resume the search tomorrow.”

The kitchen. Where he was. Just his luck. They could’ve chosen any of a dozen rooms to search, but of course they chose the one place he was.

Dak darted one direction and then the next, hoping a good hiding spot would pop out at him. But it was too late, and the kitchen door was already opening. So he ducked behind a cabinet and folded himself into the smallest ball he could make. And waited to be caught. From a certain angle, he would be all too visible.

“He won’t be in here,” Anton said. “If he was allowed to spend the night in these headquarters, they’d have given him a bed.”

“But I think this time traveler will be awake tonight,” Cleo answered. “He’ll be snooping around the place.”

Awake, yes. But snooping around a bunker loaded with Nazis? No. Dak considered himself brave, but not stupid.

“Check the back of the room,” Cleo ordered. “I’ll look over here.”

The back of the room. Dak figured the only thing that could’ve made him more obvious back here was if a large blinking arrow somehow lit up over his head. He could see Cleo’s reflection in a metal cabinet between them. She wasn’t much taller than him but was built like a

wrestler. Her dark hair was pulled back into a neat bun and her face was pinched with irritation.

“Be ready for when we find him,” Cleo said. “When you see him, just do it fast.”

Dak understood those words. They wouldn't question him, or give him a warning. There would be no chances for escape and no one would come to rescue him here. They wanted him dead and nothing else.

But then the door opened and a new voice said, “You two, what are you doing up so late?”

The tension in the room shot up so quickly, Dak could actually feel the change in the air.

“Colonel Von Roenne, we were just searching for a — a, uh, lost ring,” Cleo said.

Von Roenne? Dak had heard the name before, but couldn't quite place it. He reassured himself that if he were not on the brink of being captured, tortured, and likely killed either by the SQ or by the Nazis, that he could probably remember who Colonel Von Roenne had been.

“Whose ring?” Von Roenne surveyed the room until his gaze fell directly on Dak, who quickly waved his hands, silently begging the German not to reveal him. He knew that he must've looked scared and alone, but Dak didn't care if he did. He *was* scared and alone.

Von Roenne turned back to Cleo. “You can find your ring in the morning. Until then, the Führer does not want people wandering the halls at all hours of the night. Now go!”

“Yes, Colonel,” Anton said, hastily sweeping both himself and Cleo out the door.

Once they had gone, Von Roenne impatiently said, “Well? Come out, boy.”

Dak poked his head up over the counter to find Von Roenne staring back at him, arms folded. He was a thin man whose short, neatly combed hair revealed a deep widow's peak, and he wore round glasses that gave

him a strict, studious look. He didn't seem to be the type of person who smiled often, but then, his voice was also gentler than Dak had expected from a high-ranking Nazi. At least Von Roenne had sent the SQ duo away. Dak figured his odds of surviving the next few minutes were pretty even.

"I haven't seen you before," Von Roenne said to Dak.

Dak said nothing. Mostly because he was sure if he tried speaking, it would come out in some high-pitched squeal of terror that'd wake the entire house.

"Can you tell me why those two were looking for you?" Von Roenne asked. "What might two Nazis want with a young boy working in the kitchen?"

Okay, maybe he wouldn't scream, but he was also pretty sure his mouth had forgotten how to form actual words. So Dak only shrugged his shoulders and hoped the end would come quickly and painlessly.

"I think you must have played a joke on them and gotten caught," Von Roenne said. "Yes?"

Well, yes. *If* the joke was getting himself inside the most dangerous place in Germany.

Then Von Roenne smiled, just a little. "I suppose I played a joke or two myself when I was younger. But these are not the kind of people you want to tease."

"No, sir," Dak mumbled. Frankly, he was already pretty clear on that fact.

"And remember that you now owe me a favor in return. Do not forget."

Dak nodded. If there was one thing he would never forget, it was what Von Roenne had just done for him.

"Now, let's have no more trouble," Von Roenne said. "Something has been found in Spain, something that might give us a great advantage

over the Allies, and there is tension in the bunker. You'll be smart to stay out of everyone's way."

"Yes, sir," Dak mumbled.

Von Roenne nodded at him, then left the kitchen. Once he'd gone, Dak slumped back down to the ground, exhausted, and never so scared in his life.





## **Sera's Warnings**

SERA HAD intended to call Riq that first evening. She felt desperate to know how he was, and whether Dak had made it to Germany safely. But she had the chilling feeling somebody was watching her, most likely that creepy Clauss. It wasn't worth the risk to make a phone call.

She did, however, discover a surprising fact that made her want to call Riq even more. One of their first adventures had been on board Christopher Columbus's ship as it sailed for the new world. This Spanish city, Huelva, had looked familiar to her from the start, but it was only after she began wandering the busy port town that she realized why. Four hundred and fifty years had changed a lot of things, but not the basic landscape. She was now less than ten miles from where she, Dak, and Riq had boarded Columbus's ship. For such a small coastal lagoon in the big world, it had seen its share of history. Dak would completely geek out about that. But not tonight, not until she was sure it was safe to call.

In the meantime, she had to live the life of a spy. And that meant lying, something that Sera wasn't altogether comfortable with. It was one thing to lie to Clauss, but the doctor seemed like a good man, and Sera took no pleasure in deceiving him. She'd managed to convince him that she'd come to town from an impoverished village in order to pursue her love of science, something her family didn't understand. He allowed her

to stay the night in a small room above his garage — but warned her that he would be putting her on the next bus out of town. “A girl’s place is with her family,” he had said.

Sera hadn’t had to fake the lump in her throat at hearing that. Until then, she had managed to avoid thinking about how her parents had been SQ. But now she felt torn. Her mind struggled to understand how they could have aligned themselves with such evil people. And her heart longed for an explanation that would make everything okay. Despite everything, she still wanted to see them again.

Sera spent the following day hoping to bump into Clauss, but he was nowhere to be found. The day after that was a funeral for Major Martin attended by the same British officer who had been at the postmortem, some disinterested Spanish officers, and a few curious people from the town. Even if she hadn’t been there on spy duty, Sera wanted to attend the ceremony. She might’ve been the only person there who knew Major Martin was really a homeless man who’d died a few months ago from eating rat poison. He may not have given his life for his country, but he had given his death. For that, he deserved to be honored.

A couple of times during the funeral, she saw the top of Clauss’s crisp blond hair poking into people’s whispered conversations as if eavesdropping for anything suspicious. Perhaps he was hoping Martin’s briefcase might somehow fall from the sky and land in his lap. But it wasn’t until the guests left that he found her, sitting on a bench near the cemetery. Just to have him beside her felt like a cold wind had blown in. But she kept her calm.

“I heard a rumor that Major Martin drowned at sea,” he said.  
“Probably after his plane crashed.”

“That’s what the doctor decided.”

“Why didn’t any other bodies wash up on shore? Where’s the plane wreckage?”

*Don't appear too obvious*, Sera reminded herself. If she was supposed to be on Germany's side, then she should be hopeful, but not yet convinced.

"That's a good point," she said. "You should probably wait another week or two and see if anything else washes up."

"Stupid girl!" Clauss crossed his legs and turned away from her. "If Martin was carrying information, we can't wait two weeks to get it."

Sera tried to hide her smile. That's what she'd hoped he'd think. Who was stupid now?

"Martin had papers with him, correct? In a briefcase?"

Sera nodded. She wanted to tell him the entire fake plan, to convince him right then that Martin was real, that Britain was invading Greece and not Sicily, and that he should tell Hitler just to surrender now. But the truth was that she hadn't seen anything written on the papers. Right now, it was more important to make Clauss trust *her*. And to get that trust, she had to tell him the truth.

"He had papers," she said. "But I couldn't see what they said. There were envelopes inside the briefcase, too, and they were sealed." Then, just in case it helped, she added, "The British officer in the room didn't seem very happy that Spain has them."

Clauss smiled. "That's because many officials in Spain quietly support Germany in this war. But they can't just hand the papers over to us. Our work must be . . . subtler." He stood and withdrew from his pocket a single coin. "That's for your trouble."

"Only one?" Sera said. "This won't buy anything."

"Then find me more information," Clauss said.

Sera nodded and he left. Only then did her heart begin to beat normally again. Had she done enough? Would the papers really make their way into German hands without any further effort on her part?

She was so lost in thought that she didn't realize the doctor was approaching her until he sat on the bench where Clauss had just been.

“Sera, why were you speaking with that man?” he asked.

“Claus?” Sera tried to keep her cool, but her heart rate was already back up again. “He was curious about Major Martin. He wanted to know what happened to the briefcase. I . . .” She decided to go for it. “I told him I was curious about that, too. Do you know what the man who took it will do with it?”

The doctor scowled. “He will keep it under lock and key until he’s ordered to take it to his superiors in Madrid. It’s none of my business, and if you’re smart, you’ll leave it alone, too.”

“But —”

The doctor grabbed her shoulders and nearly shook her. “Right now, Martin’s papers are at the center of a world war. If you meddle, you will get in the way of some very dangerous people.” He released her and then pulled some money from his pocket, which he shoved into her hands. “Claus isn’t fooling anyone. He’s almost certainly spying for Berlin. If you need money, it isn’t worth making a devil’s bargain with him. Take this instead. Use it to leave town, return to your family while you can. The Nazi spies will know you saw those papers. I never should have allowed you in that room. I wish *I* had not been in that room!”

Sera pocketed the money and thanked him, promising she would consider what he’d said. Then she made her way back into town. The worry in the doctor’s voice bothered her more than she wanted to admit. Obviously, she knew this was dangerous, but hadn’t she been playing a dangerous game since the moment she and Dak stumbled into time travel? What made anything different now?

Sera knew the answer. On past missions, she had Riq with her, or Dak, or both of them. Now they were all separated, all fighting their individual battles, and she felt totally cut off from even knowing whether both boys were still okay.

*Focus*, Sera told herself. Focus on the job that had to be done. For now, that was the most important thing.

So she went back to hunting for any information that might be useful to Clauss. She hoped to hear some gossip or rumors about what was happening to Martin's papers, but if anyone had something worth sharing, they didn't let her in on the conversation. It was strange to be in the spy business, pretending to want one thing when she really wanted the very opposite. It was exhausting, actually.

The following evening, Sera decided to take the risk and call Riq. It had been five days since she'd arrived in Spain, and she hadn't dared make a phone call. But she couldn't go without hearing news any longer.

She found a pay phone not far from a fruit stand and dialed the number Riq had given her. She let it ring once, then hung up, then retrieved her coin and dialed again. It rang only once before someone picked up.

"Hello?" Riq asked.

Sera was so happy to hear a friendly voice, her words came out in an explosion of information. She told him about the postmortem examination, Clauss, and even Columbus's ship. Finally, she drew in a breath long enough to hear him telling her to stop talking. "Why?" she asked. "What's wrong? Is Dak okay? Are you?"

Now that she was listening, Riq's voice was clearly strained. "Do you still have the Infinity Ring?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"You need to leave Spain. Go anywhere. Get —" Then his words ended in a groan and the phone went silent.

"Riq!" Sera yelled. "Riq!"

Someone on the other end of the line picked up the phone. She heard breathing before any words were spoken. Then someone whispered, "Sera." The voice was like she imagined a snake would sound. "Sera, do you know who I am?"

"Tilda." Sera's hand began shaking so hard she almost dropped the phone.

“If you leave the country with that Infinity Ring, what do you think will happen to Riq?”

“Leave him alone!”

“Tomorrow, Riq and I will be in Madrid, the capital of Spain. If you want him back, then meet me in Retiro Park at noon with the Infinity Ring. Beside the lake is a large monument. Be there, or you will never see Riq again.”

Sera started to answer but the line went dead. She hung up her phone and clutched the sack holding the Infinity Ring in her hands. What was she supposed to do now?

There wasn't time for her to answer her own question. Only seconds after she left the phone booth, Clauss appeared and gripped her arm so tightly it made her wince. He dug into her pocket and pulled out the money from the doctor.

“Who gave you this?”

“The doctor at the morgue.”

“And who were you talking to just now?”

Sera tried to break free, but it did no good. “A friend of mine who's coming to Madrid. I have to go see him. Now let me go!”

“Madrid?” Clauss released her arm but stepped closer to her. “You don't have enough money to get there.”

No, she didn't. And she couldn't use the Infinity Ring again, not so soon. There had to be another way.

“I'm trying to get you more information,” Sera said. “You could pay me now, and then —”

“I have a better plan.” Clauss withdrew an envelope from his suit jacket and held it out to her. “If you safely deliver this letter for me, I will help you get to Madrid.”

“Deliver the letter to who?” Sera figured she was already in enough trouble, and so was Riq. Mincemeat Man would have to wait until she knew what to do about Tilda.

Clauss sighed. “I tried everything I could think of to get Major Martin’s papers these past few days. No matter what I try, the officials here are protecting them far too well. So well, in fact, that I am sure they must contain some important information.”

*Very important*, Sera thought. So important that it was driving her crazy. Spain was supposed to hand the papers over to the Nazis, not protect them!

Clauss continued, “Martin’s briefcase is being sent to Madrid today. It is very embarrassing to me to lose access to it, and the Führer will be disappointed in my failures. This letter is for my friend in Madrid. It explains why I could not get the briefcase and hopefully he can explain to the Führer.”

“Why not just mail it, or deliver it yourself?” Sera asked.

“Letters such as these do not go through the mail, and this town is my post. I’m not allowed to leave.”

Sera folded her arms and stared up at him. “So you’ll pay my way to Madrid, and then trust me to carry that letter there?”

Clauss shook his head. “I don’t trust anyone. But I also know that if there’s any trouble along the way, the Allies will never search a young girl. And if you fail to deliver this letter, or if you open it yourself, my friend in Madrid will find you, and please believe me when I say that he is more desperate and far less kind than I am.”

Sera reached for the letter but saw nothing written for the address. “Who is it for?”

“Major Karl-Erich Kuhlenthal. He is one of Hitler’s most trusted men in Spain, or he once was. If he doesn’t get Martin’s papers, then his career is finished.”

“What does he think about Major Martin?”

Clauss shrugged. “If Kuhlenthal can get the papers, and if they’re real, then he will save his career. So for his sake, I hope they are real.”

For safekeeping, Sera stuffed the letter in the bag holding the Infinity Ring. Before dropping her off at the train station, Clauss even bought her a small suitcase to help her look more like a traveler, then put her on a train to Madrid.

“Major Kuhlenthal should meet you at the train station, but if he doesn’t, then you can always find him at the Spanish Ministry. Give him this letter, and then stay out of his way if you want to be safe.”

Sera nodded, and ran his words through her mind as the train pulled away from the station. She would give Kuhlenthal the letter, and she definitely wanted to be safe. But if Mincemeat Man was going to succeed, the last thing she could do was stay out of his way.





## In Tilda's Grip

SERA ARRIVED at the Madrid train station early the next morning. The air was cool, but the skies were clear. Hopefully, it would warm up before she turned into a PopSQicle.

She had the letter for Major Kuhlenthal clutched in her hand. For most of the train ride, that's where it had been, so she would be sure not to lose it. The ride here had been crowded and miserable, with people speaking so many languages that it drove the translator in her ear nuts. At one point she had been pushed into a small kitchen area where she was nearly burned by a hot coffeepot. For a few moments she stared at it as she considered using it to steam open the envelope. Then she could know what the letter said. However, Dak had once told her about an old spy trick of leaving something inconspicuous in the seal of an envelope, such as an eyelash or hair, to test whether someone else had opened it. She wondered if Clauss had done that to the letter for Major Kuhlenthal, or for that matter, whether the British had done that with Major Martin's sealed letters.

Clauss hadn't been clear on where she was supposed to meet Kuhlenthal, only that he would meet her at the train station. And that question was answered the instant she stepped off the train.

The tall man standing on the train platform immediately reminded her of a hawk. His sharp blue eyes were on her the moment she emerged, and the weight of his glare made her feet drag as she shuffled forward. He looked her over like he was examining a moldy piece of bread.

“You’re the child sent by Clauss?” he asked.

Sera tried not to let her irritation show. “Yes.”

“What does it say about the Nazis that we need the help of a young girl?”

Sera had more than a few ideas of what she’d say about the Nazis, but she only straightened up tall and said, “I saw the postmortem and the papers inside the briefcase. Nobody would suspect someone like me.”

“I hope he didn’t pay you too much for that useless information,” Kuhlenthal said. “Those papers are probably fakes anyway. We are suspicious.”

“It’s good that you are,” Sera said. “Because I think Captain Clauss believes they’re real. You should let him write to the Führer about the papers. If he’s wrong, he’ll get the blame.”

“And if he’s right, he’ll get the credit!” Kuhlenthal shook his head sharply. “No. If the Führer is going to reward one of his officers, it must be me.”

Sera glanced at a clock on the wall of the station. She wasn’t sure how long it would take for her to get to Retiro Park from here, but she didn’t see the point of sticking around just to get insulted again.

“Listen, I’ve got to go,” Sera said. “If you don’t need my help —”

“I don’t,” Kuhlenthal said. “Not unless you can read English well. I speak the language, but once I get those papers, it might help to have another set of eyes on them.”

Sera smiled. “I read it as well as if I’d grown up with it.” She eyed the clock again. “I’d really better go, but I’ll try to stay close to the Ministry. If you need to find me, that’s where I’ll be.”

Kuhlenthal dismissed her, but she felt his attention still on her as she ran off. Hopefully, she could shake off his eyes in time to take care of some quick business at the train station and then make the exchange with Tilda.

With so many other passengers getting off in Madrid, it took Sera some time to locate a taxi to take her to the park, and it cost her all the money the doctor had given her a few days earlier. She was getting hungry, and the food from the markets she passed only made the hunger worse, but nothing could be done about that.

Once she arrived at Retiro Park, Sera took time to become familiar with the area and gather a few things in preparation for meeting Tilda. Then she found a quiet hiding place by the lake where she could see everyone who came and went. While she waited, it was hard not to get distracted by the majesty of the park. A series of Roman columns arched around an open gathering place. In the center of it, overlooking the lake, was a huge marble monument with several statues surrounding it. The largest statue on top was done in bronze, and was a tribute to a former Spanish king astride his horse.

At exactly twelve o'clock, Tilda whisked right past Sera's hiding place, strode through the marble columns, and stood impatiently beside the monument. Sera watched her for a few minutes, checking whether she was there alone, and whether enough people were around that she could call for help if needed. But where was Riq? Did Tilda really expect to get the Infinity Ring without Riq there to trade?

Of course she did. Tilda was controlling this exchange. To save Riq, Tilda expected Sera to do anything Tilda demanded.

Sera emerged from her hiding place with the suitcase Clauss had given her in both hands. She passed through the marble columns and caught Tilda's eye.

Tilda didn't smile, didn't even flinch a muscle. She simply stood as expressionless as the statue above her.

“There’s no point in you taking the Infinity Ring,” Sera said. “I’m the only one who can operate it because it works off my DNA.”

“Let me worry about that.”

Tilda reached for the suitcase, but Sera clutched it to her chest and locked her arms around it.

Tilda reached out a spiny hand and plucked a hair from Sera’s head, then folded it into her palm. “Problem solved.”

Sera gritted her teeth. She should’ve seen that one coming. “You still don’t get the Ring until I get Riq back.”

“And you don’t get to set the terms here!” Tilda’s eyes darted around as other people took notice of their conversation. Lowering her voice, she said, “Hand that over, and I’ll tell you where to find your friend.”

“Maybe I’ve changed my mind.” Sera back stepped away from Tilda. “You just want the Ring so you can control time, but that doesn’t work! The fabric of reality can’t take that kind of abuse. All you can do is make your own place in history.”

Tilda grabbed the suitcase. “Oh, that’s exactly what I plan to do. Trust me.”

Sera tugged back, but Tilda had a strong hold on it. “You won’t be able to figure it out!” Sera said.

“Then maybe you should come and help me.” By then Tilda had the suitcase handle in one hand, and the other locked around Sera’s arm. Sera tried pulling away, but Tilda wasn’t giving in. And for Sera’s plan to work, she *had* to give this creep the slip.

She had come to save Riq, but now it looked as if she was going to be captured right along with him!



## **Riq's Escape**

RIQ AWOKED in darkness with the back of his head feeling like someone was hitting it with a mallet. He raised his hands to calm the headache, then realized they were tied in front of him. His legs were tied, too, and he must have been this way for some time because his lower leg had fallen asleep and was tingling with pain.

Riq tried to shake it out, but the jostling only made his arm brush along something beneath him that was sharp and left small cuts in his skin. Where was he anyway?

Wiggling his body around, Riq felt a low metal roof over his head, an uneven floor, and metal sides. Then he groaned. This was the trunk of a car. An early model Squautomobile, no doubt.

The last thing he remembered was being on the phone with Sera, trying to warn her about Tilda. Then someone clunked him on the head and now he was in here. The car was stopped, which might mean they had already arrived wherever they were going. Probably Spain, where Sera and the Infinity Ring were.

Riq rolled again, hoping to find a way out of the trunk. He couldn't kick his way free; even feeling the thick metal with his hands he could tell it was far more solid than the cars of his era. Maybe it was true what

his grandmother had always told him. Maybe things *were* made better back in the day.

So he moved to his back again, but this time he landed directly on that sharp edge of metal. He wasn't sure exactly what it was, but it was hard to avoid and would have him in slices by the time someone came for him. He tried shifting, but the ropes around his wrists got caught on the metal piece.

Riq rolled his eyes — it was one of his biggest “duh” moments ever. Immediately, he started scraping the rope against the metal, letting the sharp edge dig deeper and deeper into the fibers. It took him longer than he wanted, but finally there was a snap and the rope loosened. He shook it off, then crouched forward and began untying the rope around his feet.

Once he was free, he felt around the trunk for any way to release the latch, but nothing he pressed on did any good, and there didn't seem to be anything with him in this trunk that could be used to escape. His only choice was to wait until someone opened the trunk from the outside. Maybe if he jumped up at just the right time . . .

Maybe not. Tilda's two SQ thugs were big guys, and unless they were half asleep they'd catch him before he even got to a sitting position.

And it might already be too late. The car had been parked for some time. Tilda might have the Ring now. She was desperate to get it; she had talked about nothing else while she had him captured, waiting each night for Sera to call. She kept asking Riq about it until he convinced her that only Sera knew how to operate it or how it worked.

But then he heard the car doors open and shut, and voices outside the trunk — the two SQ men. They were arguing about something, though he couldn't catch any of the words. Then one man yelled to the other to stop talking so loudly or Tilda would be furious with them, and Riq couldn't help but smile. No matter how big and brutal those guys were, they were still afraid of Tilda.

When the trunk lid opened, Riq was lying on his side in the same position as when he'd first awoken. The ropes were over his wrists and ankles as if he was still tied up, and his eyes were closed.

"How hard did you hit him anyway?" one of the men asked.

"I dunno. Is he still alive?"

The first guy reached down and felt for the pulse at his neck. "Of course he is. And what do we care if he's hurt anyway? Once we have the Infinity Ring, it doesn't matter if he lives."

Riq resented that. It mattered a great deal to him whether he lived.

"All I care about is the money she promised us. Nothing else."

"What does money matter?" The man speaking now lowered his voice to almost a whisper. "If we stay close to Tilda until she has the Ring, we could take it for ourselves and sell it for all the money in the world."

They both laughed greedily. Then one of them asked, "Do you think that girl is at the lake yet?"

"How would I know? But Tilda left a long time ago. We need to make room in this trunk. When she gets the Ring, she'll bring the girl back here. Then we'll take them both for a long ride. Maybe Tilda, too."

"A long, one-way ride," the other man said, chuckling. He reached forward to scoot Riq's body deeper into the trunk. When he did, Riq shot out his legs and kicked the man backward. Soccer practice had been useful for something other than making goals. It also built excellent leg muscles.

The man stumbled back, knocking the other to the ground with him, and Riq leapt from the trunk like a cannon had shot him out of there. Both men got to their feet and began chasing him down the street.

The car had been parked in a sort of alley but across from a large park – probably the park where Sera was supposed to meet Tilda. The thugs said they weren't sure if that meeting had happened yet, only that it would happen near a lake.

But it couldn't be just anywhere at the lake. There would have to be some sort of landmark. Someplace easy for both of them to find. He had to look for something like that.

He ran across the street with the two SQ men not far behind him. But again, soccer was paying off. Riq could run fast, and he was sure they would get tired before he did. The park was busy today, and Riq did his best to not get tangled in the crowds. He passed a small fountain and paused to look back, but saw the SQ men just on the opposite side. One lunged for him and ended up splashing into the fountain.

Up ahead was a group of children, probably on a school trip. Riq weaved among them effortlessly and then darted off the trail at an intersection, onto a small path between tall rows of thick green shrubs. He squeezed between two shrubs and used a tiny hole in the greenery to peek through.

The men caught up to the schoolchildren, which slowed them down considerably. They came to the intersection and looked in all directions, then continued down the main park trail. Riq exhaled in relief. At least for now, he was safe.

But he couldn't stay hidden. He had to find Sera, and fast.

Riq emerged from his hiding place and saw a man and his wife not far from him. He tapped the man's shoulder, then in Spanish asked him if there were any landmarks near the lake. The man rolled his eyes as if Riq had just asked the most obvious question in the world, right up there with which direction he should look to find the sky. But he told him to look for the great monument, jerked a finger in that direction, and Riq went running, tossing a *gracias* behind him.

Riq soon found the lake, but it was a long way around to the other side, where a tall bronze statue portrayed a man on a horse surrounded by smaller white columns. Steps led from the statue down to the water and, in the center of them all, was Tilda, perfectly straight and still, waiting for Sera.



Riq looked around him again. The thugs were here somewhere, knowing this was where he'd go. But where were they?

Then he saw another figure emerge onto the steps. Sera. In her hands was some sort of suitcase. She must've put the Infinity Ring in there for safety. She clutched it to her chest, unwilling to give it up, and then she spoke to Tilda for a moment.

Riq began running. As fast as he could and with no care for whether the men would jump out at him. Sera could not give up that Ring, and she definitely could not go anywhere with Tilda.

He called out Sera's name but a breeze was blowing in his face, carrying his words away from the stone steps. He waved his arms, hoping to make Sera see him, desperate to stop her.

Instead, he caught Tilda's attention. Her oily lips pressed tightly together, and she ripped the suitcase away from Sera's hands. Sera took a step back but Tilda clutched her arm, too, and started dragging her away.

As Riq continued running, the SQ men came through the columns, aiming directly for him. With them on one side and the lake in the other, Riq had a choice to make: run away and save himself, or run toward Tilda and risk being captured again.

They were trapped. But he knew what he had to do.



“Sera, no!”

Recognizing Riq's voice, Sera looked over her shoulder and saw her friend racing toward her. Tilda actually hissed as she released Sera's arm and turned to run, still clutching the suitcase tightly. Riq obviously wanted to chase after her, but two burly men were running toward them, reeking of the SQ. So while Tilda bolted with the suitcase, Sera pulled Riq with her in the other direction.

“You escaped?” Sera asked Riq as they ran. She was beyond relieved about that.

“From those two guys chasing us,” Riq said.

Sera glanced behind them, but the men weren't there. They had disappeared with Tilda. “I think they're gone.”

Riq slowed, then stopped and looked carefully around them. When he was satisfied they were safe, he looked back at her with lips turned down and eyes that were clearly angry. Sera had expected gratitude from him. Not anger.

“You never should've come,” he said.

“To save your life?” Sera said. “Yeah, so sorry about that.”

“You saved my life, but at what price?” Riq drew in a breath.

“You've given Tilda the power to destroy the world.”

“She would've killed you if I didn't meet her.”

“I'm a Hystorian, Sera. Protecting history from the SQ is more important than any of our lives. My life especially.”

Sera blinked hard, but her eyes were clear when she stared back at him. “Dak and I can't do this alone. If we lose you, we won't be able to protect history from a stiff breeze.”

She saw Riq soften at that, and his eyes darted away a moment before he said, “Thanks for the rescue, really. But just think about all the damage Tilda can do now. With the Ring, she could undo everything we've done. Or worse, go to other times and create entirely new Breaks.”

At that, Sera smiled. “I've learned a few tricks since becoming a spy, you know. The Infinity Ring is safely hidden in locker forty-three at the train station.”

Riq broke into a grin as well. “What was in that suitcase, then?”

“Rocks.” Sera giggled. “Tilda's about to discover she made a deal for a couple of dumb, heavy rocks.”

The leaves on the other side of the hedge where they were talking rustled in the wind, a reminder they were still out in the open. Tilda and her thugs were somewhere nearby. It was time to go.

Besides, they had a war to win.



## The Trojan Deception

DAK HAD spent most of the past few days keeping his head down and, whenever possible, keeping out of sight. He did whatever kitchen work was asked of him and slept in a pantry hidden behind large buckets of sugar and flour. It wasn't pleasant, but neither was getting caught by the SQ. Of the two, he knew which was worse.

That all changed one afternoon when word came that an officer upstairs wanted a cup of tea. Everyone was busy preparing for supper, and finally the woman who had hired him pointed at Dak and said, "You, boy, take it up to him."

Dak wanted to tell her no, for the very good reason that somewhere outside the kitchens were two people under orders from Tilda to shorten his life span significantly. But he also knew he wasn't there to hide. It was his job to make sure that the German military's leaders accepted Major Martin's papers as real. This was an opportunity to get closer to them.

So he gathered everything for the tea onto a tray and asked, "Who is this for?"

*Don't say it's for Hitler*, he thought. If it was, Dak would be sorely tempted to throw the hot tea on him, Mincemeat Man or not.

But it wasn't. "Colonel Von Roenne," came the answer. "He's in his office upstairs."

Dak rolled his eyes and walked into the hallway. Von Roenne hadn't exposed him to Cleo and Anton before, which was a good sign. But Dak was still struggling to remember the significance of Von Roenne's name. He wished he'd thought to pick up a history book or two while in the twenty-first century.

Once upstairs, he passed several closed doors and wondered who was inside. He passed some open doors, too. In one of them, several Nazi officers were engaged in a loud argument.

"Martin is nothing but a Trojan horse!" one of the men shouted. "The British are playing tricks just as the Romans once did."

"Greeks!" Dak said before he thought better of it. The men stopped and stared at him, then Dak clamped his mouth shut and passed the open door.

Okay, yes, maybe he shouldn't have said anything, but if they were going to discuss the Trojan horse, they ought to get their facts straight. Over three thousand years ago BC, the Greeks wanted to invade the city of Troy, but after ten years of fighting still couldn't get inside their walls. So they built a huge wooden horse and left it outside the city walls, then went away. The Trojans pulled the horse inside their gates as a prize of war. What the city didn't know was that the Greeks had hidden soldiers inside the wooden horse, who waited until everyone was asleep at night, then snuck out and opened the gates. The rest of their army entered, and Troy fell soon after.

Whether the story actually happened was debatable, but personally, Dak believed it. And he thought the comparison to Mincemeat Man was pretty fair, too. The British had given Germany something they'd think was a prize of war — a dead body with secret information attached. But that information could be as destructive to the Germans as the Greek

soldiers were to Troy. Mincemeat Man really was a modern-day Trojan horse.

“If the British wanted to trick us, there are easier ways,” another man argued.

“Major Kuhlenthal tells us he will have Martin’s papers any day now,” a third man said. “Let’s see what they say and then we’ll decide.”

“Kuhlenthal is too desperate to please the Führer,” the first man said. “He will want to believe the papers are true because he needs them to be true. We need a more reasonable evaluation.”

“Colonel Von Roenne will look over the information,” the third man said. “There are few people Hitler trusts more.”

Hearing the colonel’s name reminded Dak that he had better deliver the tea before the water got cold. He left the men arguing and walked the rest of the way to Von Roenne’s office.

He knocked on the door and heard a quick “Come in.” Dak carefully balanced the heavy tray on one hand while he turned the doorknob and entered. But for all that, he nearly dropped it anyway once he looked up. Staring back at him, on either side of Von Roenne’s desk, were Anton and Cleo.

Dak froze, unsure of what to do. It was too late to pretend he didn’t know who they were. Should he drop the tray and run? Expose their SQ connections to Von Roenne? Maybe the colonel already knew. Maybe that’s why he had called Dak here.

Anton and Cleo grinned wickedly when they recognized him, but Von Roenne didn’t seem to notice. He motioned for Dak to bring the tray over to him, and then apologized for not having any to offer the others in the room.

“Shall I send this boy to bring more tea?” he asked politely.

“No,” Anton said, staring down at Dak. “We can get whatever we want from him later on. And we will.” His grin widened, but not in a pleasant way.

Von Roenne shifted the tray on his desk and several papers fell onto the floor near Dak. “Pick them up, will you, boy?” he asked.

Dak dropped to his knees to straighten the papers that had fallen. One, right on top, was printed with purple ink on a half sheet of thin, cream-colored paper. It was a telegram — sort of like text messaging for the 1940s. It read:

Col Von Roenne: Will have papers soon. Will offer evaluation but hope you agree. Maj Kuhlenthal

Dak figured this was probably the note that had started the argument back in that other room. He’d heard Kuhlenthal’s name before, how powerful he eventually became in the war. This telegraph certainly had to be referring to Major Martin’s papers.

Dak finished straightening the rest of the pile, then got to his feet and put it on the desk. Von Roenne noticed the telegram on top and looked up as if to ask whether Dak had read the telegram. But he didn’t actually ask, and Dak wasn’t about to volunteer the information. He only backed up and said, “May I go now?”

“You may,” Von Roenne said.

“We’d better be leaving, too,” Cleo said, keeping one eye on Dak.

“Not yet,” Von Roenne said. “I have a few more questions first.”

“Very well.” She seemed irritated, but clearly had to do as Von Roenne ordered. Before Dak left, she turned to him and said, “I will want some tea when I’m finished here. I’ll know where to find you when I’m ready.”

Dak left the office, but he wasn’t going back to the kitchens now. Maybe not ever. Every part of him wanted to leave the bunker at once and run for his life. But he was a spy now, and he had to finish his mission.

If this Major Kuhlenthal would have the papers soon, and if it was Von Roenne's job to decide whether they were real, then Dak had to get closer to Von Roenne. He found a small closet not far from Von Roenne's office and ducked inside, then closed the door after him. When Kuhlenthal sent the papers, the men in the office would begin arguing about them again. And that would be his sign that it was time to come out and convince one of Hitler's most trusted men to let his country lose a world war.



## **Kuhlenthal's Request**

SEAR AND Riq spent the rest of the afternoon near the German Embassy, where they discovered one interesting fact: Madrid loved gossip. The people here devoured it the way rabbits eat carrots. Everyone had his or her own tidbit of news to share in exchange for a friend's even juicier morsel. The two watched different pairs of people come and go from the embassy, heads inclined toward each other to share the latest scoop. And nobody seemed to care if they were talking near a young girl and boy engaged in a game of jacks. Sera and Riq might have looked like they were playing, but both had their ears tuned in to every word that was spoken near them.

"Nobody works harder than Kuhlenthal at spying on us," one Spanish officer said laughingly to another. "Does he think we don't know who he is? He's lucky so many of us support the Nazis, or he wouldn't get very far."

"I've heard he has Jewish blood, from a grandmother," the officer's companion said. "Can you believe it, a Jewish-born Nazi? Imagine if Hitler knew about that."

Minutes later, two men in Nazi uniforms passed them. "Personally, I doubt the papers are real," one of them said. "But that's for Kuhlenthal to decide, not us."



“He had better hope he gets this right,” responded the other. “He’s fallen for Allied tricks before. And yet, if the papers are real and Kuhlenthal backs them, he will become the Führer’s favorite spy.”

Sera looked over at Riq and frowned. This spy business was starting to mess with her head.

Britain needed everyone to think they were desperate to get Martin’s papers back.

But they couldn’t actually succeed in getting them back. At least, not until Germany saw them.

The papers had to look as if they were written in a code, to protect them in case they were found.

Yet the code had to be easy for Germany to figure out, although not so easy that it would look as if Britain was trying to trick them.

And if she and Riq were going to be helpful, they had to persuade Kuhlenthal to trust them. If they pushed too hard, though, he might suspect something. So how were they supposed to convince him?

After several hours, Riq and Sera had nearly given up hope of even seeing Kuhlenthal that day. Maybe he’d come tomorrow. Or maybe never. Sera was standing up to leave when she heard footsteps behind her and turned.

Kuhlenthal was right behind her, but his blue eyes were focused on Riq. “Who is this?”

“We both speak English,” Sera said. “But my friend here can speak a dozen other languages perfectly.”

“Two dozen,” Riq corrected, then shrugged when Sera glanced back at him. “I’ve been practicing in my spare time.”

Kuhlenthal frowned. “We have other Nazis who can read English, of course, but if I let them see the letters, they’ll tell Hitler that *they* solved this mystery, not me. You understand that I can’t allow anyone else to read them until I’ve made my report.”

Sera nodded. Her heart was racing, though she wasn't sure if it was from excitement or fear. Maybe it was both.

“You can trust us,” Riq said. “Besides, even if we tried to report back to Hitler, he'd never believe a couple of kids.”

Kuhlenthal seemed to like that. He stepped closer to them and said, “The wet ink ran in a few places and I can't make out the words. I must get a report back to Germany immediately. Can you help me read it?”

Sera and Riq followed Kuhlenthal into the German Embassy. He led them downstairs into a narrow, poorly lit hallway, and on their way, explained that the Spanish officials had cleverly managed to remove the letters from the envelopes without breaking the seals. The letters had been dried and then given to him — but only for a single hour. There had been just enough time to photograph the letters before returning them, and now the photos had been developed.

“What will happen to the letters now?” Sera asked.

“Spain will soak them in seawater again, then refold them and replace them in the envelopes. They will lock the briefcase and return it to Britain as if none of this had ever happened.” He chuckled.

“Sometimes I have thought the Allies are very clever. But they underestimated the reach of the Nazis. They will continue forward with their battle plans without any idea that we know their secrets.”

Sera cast an eye at Riq, who only lifted his eyebrows in response. It was a most dangerous game of cat and mouse. Both Germany and Britain believed they were tricking the other side. And in the next great battle between the two, one would be proven right, and the other would suffer a major defeat that could cost thousands of lives.

Kuhlenthal put his hand on a doorknob, but before opening it turned to Sera and Riq. “The only person who will ever know you saw these is me,” he said. “So if you try any tricks, nothing can save you.”

Sera swallowed hard and nodded, then Kuhlenthal led them into a small room with portable lights set up to brighten it. The papers that

must have been there only a short time ago were now replaced with enlarged black-and-white photographs. The photographer had been thorough. Every word of the letters was in at least one of his pictures.

Kuhlenthal motioned them in closer, then spread out the photos so they could be better examined.

The first photo was Martin's military identification card. The person pictured on the identification looked very similar to the body that Sera had seen during the postmortem, but it couldn't be the same person. She knew the British had gotten Martin's body after he was already dead, while this man was very much alive. Sera had once heard that everyone in the world had someone out there who looked exactly like them — a doppelganger — and if that was true, the British had somehow managed to find that person for their Mincemeat Man.

Kuhlenthal lifted the identity card to Sera. "You've seen his body for yourself," he said. "Is this the same man?"

Sera pretended to study the picture, but of course she already knew how she'd answer. "The body had decomposed from its time in the water," she said. "But this picture looks just like him." She figured that was truthful enough.

Another set of photos documented a letter to Major Martin from his father, scolding him for not being as responsible as he should. Then there was a loving letter from a woman who was engaged to marry Martin. That one looked as if it had been folded and unfolded many times — Sera liked that detail. Of course a man at war would reread that letter as often as possible.

Of more interest to the Germans, there was a note from Martin's commander warning the recipient that the papers he was carrying were very important and secretive. It also made a request for Martin to return with some sardines, since they were hard to find in Britain. That was a bogus request, since whoever actually wrote the letter would have known

Major Martin would not come back alive. He didn't even leave while still alive.

Along with that note was the heart of the entire Mincemeat Man plan: a letter from one British general to another. Sera read it as quickly as she could. It said that they hoped the Germans would believe Sicily was about to be attacked, but that the real invasion was for Greece. The letter had everything the Germans would need: the dates for the attack, the size of the invasion force, and the code names that would be used.

The risk was plain enough. If Germany didn't believe the Allies were going to invade Greece, then they would know quite a bit about the real invasion of Sicily.

Kuhlenthal pointed out a few words where the ink had run, and Riq and Sera were both quick to give their most honest opinions as to what was written there. When they were finished, Kuhlenthal pulled up a chair and leaned back, deep in thought, with his eyes closed and the fingertips of each hand pressed against one another. Riq and Sera waited in the awkward silence, unsure of what to do.

Finally, Kuhlenthal opened his eyes. "Why would the Allies want Greece?" he asked. "Sicily is far more important."

"But Sicily is too well defended," Riq said. "If the Allies take Greece, then they will be in a better position to attack Sicily later on."

"True." Kuhlenthal went back into deep thought, and after a moment he said, "A commander of the British army is having a hard time finding a simple can of sardines? Are things so bad in Britain that even a general can't have his treat?"

"Sardines are the least of Britain's problems," Sera said. "Besides, they smell bad anyway."

"What smells?" Kuhlenthal asked. "The sardines or the British?"

Riq and Sera laughed, but not really. The situation was far too dangerous and the joke just wasn't that funny.

Kuhlenthal quickly grew serious again. “I wouldn’t dare to share this secret with anyone else — most of the Nazis here would be very glad to see me fail and take my place — but I need these papers to be real. It has been a long time since I have sent anything useful to Hitler. He is becoming . . . impatient with me.”

That was their chance, Sera realized. Kuhlenthal would believe the letters simply because he wanted so badly for them to be real. For the sake of his career, and maybe his life, he *needed* them to be real.

Which led her to a worse idea. For a long time, Sera had believed that if they fixed history and made everything okay, that her family would be there when she came home, happy and healthy and alive. Even with Tilda’s recent accusations, Sera realized she *still* expected a happy reunion at the end of all this. But maybe her visions of a happy ending weren’t any more real than Major Martin’s papers. Maybe she only believed it would come true because she wanted so desperately for it to come true.

Suddenly, Kuhlenthal clapped his hands together and stood up, then began gathering the photos. “I must catch a flight back to Germany at once,” he said. “I will deliver these to the Führer myself.”

“What are you going to tell him?” Riq asked.

“My report will be as balanced as I can make it,” Kuhlenthal answered. “But if I am to convince the Führer that the Allies are invading Greece, I will need to get his most trusted man on my side: Colonel Von Roenne.”



## **Sera's Suspicions**

THEY HAD done as much as they possibly could, and with that, Sera was more than happy to get herself and Riq out of there. Kuhlenthal spooked her. He wasn't SQ, but that didn't make him any less dangerous. As far as she was concerned, she and Riq had done everything they could to convince him to believe Mincemeat Man. The rest was up to Dak.

"I wish to pay you for your services," Kuhlenthal said. "Whatever Clauss gave you, I will give you the same."

Sera started to tell him no thanks, but Riq quickly accepted, then looked at Sera as if to remind her that Kuhlenthal would trust them more if he could pay them. Besides, they needed some money if they were going to eat in the next few days.

Eating was a fine idea, but so was being alive, and Sera wasn't entirely sure that was Kuhlenthal's plan.

Kuhlenthal escorted Riq and Sera outside, leading them away from the building and down a steep hill where it was dark and they were alone. Sera didn't like the feel of this, not at all, but how could she warn Riq of her concerns without alerting Kuhlenthal?

"I know there are many spies like me." Kuhlenthal's dark expression was lit by the bright moon overhead. "And then there are double agents, who pretend to be on my side, but work for the enemy."

“We helped you,” Sera said.

“And I told you, I don’t need the help of a young girl.” He turned and pulled some money from his pocket, then held it out to them. “This will pay for your silence, I think.”

Sera stood in place, still suspicious, but Riq thanked the major and stepped forward to accept the money. When he reached out his hand, Sera caught a glint of metal in the moonlight. She cried, “Riq, he has a knife!”

Riq swerved around, but Kuhlenthal grabbed his arm and yanked Riq toward him. Sera noticed a fallen tree branch near her feet. She picked it up and swung it at Kuhlenthal like she was batting for a home run.

She connected with a satisfying crack, and the branch broke in two.

Riq fell forward onto the ground, clutching at his side, and Kuhlenthal rolled backward down the steep hill. Down where Sera figured she and Riq were supposed to have rolled instead, probably not to have been found for days.

“C’mon,” Sera yelled, starting to run up the hill.

But Riq, still on his knees, was gathering up the money that had scattered when Kuhlenthal had fallen. “We’ll need this!”

He was right about that, and Sera hurried back to help him grab what they could before Kuhlenthal made it up the hillside again. They heard his growls somewhere below them, and set off as quickly as they could run.

Neither of them stopped until they were far away from Kuhlenthal, the Ministry building, and anyone who even looked like a spy.

Only then did Riq sink against a shop wall, still holding his side. “He cut me.”

“What?” Sera went to her knees beside him. His shirt had a small slice in it, but only a thin trickle of blood was showing.

“How bad is it?” Riq asked.

“Pretty awful,” Sera said, hiding her smile. “You’ll need surgery, but since we can’t trust the doctors here, I’ll have to do it myself. Do you happen to have a needle and thread?”

“Oh, no you don’t!” Riq practically leapt to his feet and twisted around to inspect the damage for himself. Then he looked up. “Yeah, that was funny. Now I can see why you and Dak get along.”

“Sorry,” Sera said, laughing now. “Does it hurt?”

“Yeah,” Riq said. “But I guess it’s not as bad as I thought. Let’s get out of here.”

“But to where?” Sera asked. “It’s after curfew, so we shouldn’t be out.”

She followed after Riq as he started walking. “We passed a quiet alley a little ways back,” he said. “It’s a warm night and the alley should give us some protection in case Kuhlenthal goes poking around. We’ll take shifts staying awake tonight and figure out what to do next after we’ve had some sleep.”

They didn’t get much sleep, but the following morning, Sera and Riq each bought a warm, sugary churro and talked over what they should do next.

“We’ve done as much as we can,” Riq said. “Kuhlenthal will take the papers to Germany and the rest will be up to Dak.”

“*If* Dak even stuck around,” Sera said worriedly. Riq had told her about Tilda’s orders to have the SQ in Berlin find him, which had put a knot in her stomach that wouldn’t go away. “I think we need to go to Germany,” she added. “We have to see this through, and besides, we have to find Dak.”

Riq nodded, but Sera saw the doubt in his eyes. “Kuhlenthal mentioned that he had to get a flight into Germany. It’s probably on a military plane, so we can’t follow that way.”

“I know,” Sera said. “But we have to get the Infinity Ring from the train station anyway. We’ll use the money from Kuhlenthal to catch the



next train out of here, so we probably won't be too far behind him."

"If Dak is still okay, our going to Germany might make things worse for him," Riq warned.

"I know." Sera drew in a breath. "If he's undercover, we could expose him. But we're not warping out of here without Dak. We have to take the risk."

They took a taxi to the train station, always with one eye on the cars around them to be sure they weren't followed. Once they arrived, Sera led Riq to some lockers.

"I knew I couldn't bring the Infinity Ring anywhere near that park," she explained. "It was too dangerous to just hide it under a bush or something, and if I had it on me, Tilda would've known it wasn't in that suitcase."

"But these lockers don't look all that secure," Riq said. "Anyone with a basic knowledge of lock picking could get inside one."

"Maybe," Sera said. "But nobody other than us knows the Infinity Ring's bag is here, so they'd have no reason to break in."

She inserted a key into the lock and opened the door. The Infinity Ring's bag was there, exactly as she had left it.

But everything wasn't *exactly* as it had been. Just as a spy would, Sera had plucked a hair from her head and laid it over the top of the satchel. If someone wanted to open the satchel, they'd have to move the hair to do so. And to Sera's dismay, she noticed now that the strand of hair was *under* the satchel. Had someone else been inside this locker?

Sera lunged for the bag and pulled it open, revealing the Infinity Ring — safe and sound.

"What's wrong?" Riq asked.

"Nothing," Sera said quickly. But she wondered: What if Tilda had somehow known the Infinity Ring was in here? Was it possible she had broken in and used it?

Sera sighed. She hated to admit it, but it was possible. However, it was also unlikely. If Tilda or anyone else had gone to so much trouble to steal the Ring, why bother returning it? Maybe someone had broken into the locker for valuables, and assumed the Ring was a worthless toy.

“C’mon,” Sera said, lifting the satchel and returning it to her belt, “we’ve got a train to catch.”

Minutes later as their train rolled out of the station, Riq leaned over to Sera and said, “It won’t be as easy as you think to waltz into Germany. Are you sure it’s worth all this trouble to get Dak?”

Sera smiled at his joke, but the knot in her stomach returned again. If Dak was . . . If the SQ had already gotten to Dak, then everything they had done so far would have been a waste of time.



## **Dak and the Wolf**

DAK WASN'T sure how long he stayed hidden in that closet. He knew when Anton and Cleo left Von Roenne's office because they walked past, and Anton muttered something about "Gotta find that kid today." And Cleo then said something about waiting for him to show up near the kitchen.

Words like that made it a lot easier to stay right where he was. And except for the fact that he was getting tired of standing, it wasn't the worst place. In the darkness, he started counting backward from 1943, listing off major world events from each year, like any ordinary history genius might do for fun. He got briefly stuck on 1938, until he remembered a radio show called "War of the Worlds" that had been performed to sound like a news alert about an alien invasion. Even though there were several announcements during the broadcast about it only being a performance, it set the entire country into a panic for hours. People packed up and left their homes, fired guns into the air to warn away the aliens, and prepared themselves for the end of the world.

Dak frowned at that. There was certainly no alien attack, but the end of the world was coming if he didn't gather up some courage and leave this closet.

He slowly opened the closet door and looked both ways before sneaking out. It was late and most people had gone home. But in Von Roenne's office, Dak could hear the clatter of a typewriter.

He balled up his fists, took a deep breath, and then knocked on Von Roenne's door.

"Come in." As usual, Von Roenne's voice was terse, but not unkind.

When Dak entered, Von Roenne looked up, arched an eyebrow when he recognized Dak, then swiveled his chair away from his typewriter and clasped his hands.

"You again?" Von Roenne seemed curious, although Dak wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. "What do you want?"

"A few days ago, you said I owe you a favor. I want to repay you now. I can help here in your office, with any jobs you need."

Von Roenne stared at him a moment, then pushed his glasses higher on his nose. "Please have a seat. What is your name?"

"Dak."

"An unusual name. Are you German?"

"There's German blood on my mother's side." However, Dak failed to mention that his great-grandfather was born near London, and in fact, was serving in the British navy at this time. He figured Von Roenne didn't need that much of his family background.

"I'm told a housekeeper brought you here to help in the kitchen."

"Yes, sir."

Von Roenne leaned in closer. "But I suspect there's more to you than that. We both know about the man and woman in these headquarters who seem to have nothing better to do than look for you. I suspect if you're caught, our housekeeper will need another kitchen boy. Why is that? Did you steal something from them?"

"No, sir."

"Did you cause them any trouble?"

"No, sir." It was actually just the opposite.

Von Roenne frowned at him. “Then are you here as a spy?”

Despite trying to hide any reaction, Dak was taken aback by the question and his eyes widened. He tried to speak, but his mouth felt like it was full of cotton, and his tongue felt roughly the size of Everest.

Von Roenne leaned back. “Ah, so the Allies are using children now to spy on us. Is that because they have so much trust in you, or so little fear of us?”

“The Allies have no idea I’m here. They don’t know anything about me.”

“Then why are you here?” Impatient for an answer, Von Roenne said, “You’ll talk to me, or I’ll turn you over to that pair who are probably searching this building for you right now.”

“I – I’m not . . . I just —” Which was as far as Dak got before the cotton mouth started up again.

Obviously, he couldn’t tell one of Hitler’s most trusted advisers that he was here from the future. The idea of what Hitler could do if he got control of time travel was terrifying.

Nor could he tell Von Roenne about Mincemeat Man. The last thing he needed was for the collapse of the Allies in World War II to be blamed on him. He would be in the history books one day — Dak was sure of that — but not for being the one to destroy the free world. No way.

But he was having trouble coming up with any reason why he might be here otherwise. The obvious thought was to convince Von Roenne that he wanted to join up with the Nazis, that he believed in their cause and wanted to help, even if he was too young to be a soldier.

But there was no way Dak would tell a lie like that. Even to save the mission or to save his own life, Dak would never let those words come out of his mouth. Von Roenne seemed like a decent enough person. But he was fighting for the wrong side, and taking orders from truly evil men.

The Führer, Adolf Hitler, was responsible for millions of deaths on the battlefield, both from those fighting for him and against him. Beyond that, before the war ended, he would be responsible for the deaths of over six million Jewish people. Innocent families who would be rounded up, held in concentration camps, and eventually killed for no crime other than who they were by faith and by heritage.

Thinking of them, Dak was surer than ever that Mincemeat Man had to succeed. It wouldn't save all those lives, but at least the Allies would win in the end, and those lost lives could forever serve as a reminder of how evil must never be allowed to spread.

"All right, if you won't talk, then you'll come with me." Von Roenne stood and walked from behind his desk over to Dak.

"You can't give me to Anton and Cleo," Dak said. "They'll kill me if you do."

Von Roenne placed his hands on his hips. "Then why —"

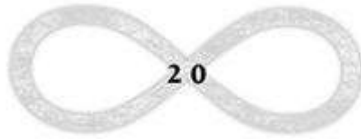
He was interrupted by another knock on his door. Dak looked all around for any way he might escape if it was Anton and Cleo returning. He could dive out Von Roenne's window, which always looked pretty cool in action movies. But in real life, he'd never do that. The glass would get him all cut up, and he'd probably break a leg landing on the cement below. If it were them, his only choice would be to run and hope like crazy to be fast enough that they couldn't grab him.

Dak pressed his toes against the ground, ready to push off and run.

Von Roenne invited whoever had knocked to enter, but rather than the two Time Wardens, it was a group of Nazi soldiers who entered instead. *Oh, good*, Dak thought. *More Nazis.*

"The Führer to see Colonel Von Roenne," one of the soldiers announced.

Dak forgot anything he had ever known about running and instead backed up behind Von Roenne. Now entering the room was none other than Adolf Hitler.



## Von Roenne's Rescue

COLONEL VON Roenne stood at attention and raised his right arm straight in front of him. “*Heil, mein Führer!*” He nudged at Dak to do the same, but Dak could not, *would not*, do it.

Everything Dak had ever read about Adolf Hitler flooded his mind. How he'd wanted to be an artist when he was young, but failed. How he fought for Germany in the First World War and felt betrayed when his leaders surrendered. The months he spent in prison for trying to overthrow the government, and then afterward, how he built up his Nazi party to take over the government in a legal way. Once he had control, he took over Austria without firing a single shot. But when he invaded Poland, the Second World War began.

Hitler was of average height and build, but people may not have noticed since their attention likely went straight to his face. His thin brown hair was parted at the side and combed neatly across his forehead, and he had a small square mustache above his lip. His eyes were cold and stern, and seemed to bore through anything he stared at.

Luckily, Hitler gave Dak all the notice that he'd give a chair in the room. His eyes flicked over Dak and settled on Von Roenne.

“Have the papers arrived yet?” Hitler asked.

“No, *mein Führer*. But I’m waiting here in case Major Kuhlenthal arrives late tonight. We only know that the papers indicate the Allies will attack Greece and not Sicily.”

“It sounds too easy,” Hitler said. “That a dead British officer should wash up on the shores of Spain with the most top secret of plans?”

“I also have my suspicions,” Von Roenne said. “But until we have those papers, we cannot know exactly what the plans are, or if they are real.”

“I’m told that Captain Clauss got very close to the body, and that it is certain to have drowned off the coast of Spain.”

“He was there for the examination?” Von Roenne asked.

“No, but he had an informant who was there, a Spanish girl who assisted the doctor. Afterward, she told him everything she had seen.”

Dak smiled to himself. Sera had a primarily Mayan heritage, not Spanish, but it must have been her at the autopsy. Sometimes she was so cool!

Von Roenne sighed. “Then it sounds hopeful. But even if the papers are an Allied trick, this is still very good news for us. If they are real, then our army must move to Greece. The Allies will be surprised to see us there. It will be an easy win for Germany.”

Hitler cocked an eyebrow. “And if the plans are fake?”

“Then I will know.” Von Roenne spoke so confidently that Dak became worried. He added, “If the plans are fake, then it will be obvious that the Allies are going to Sicily. Our forces are so strong there, the Allies won’t have a chance. Either way, the coming battle will seal Germany as an eventual winner in this war.”

Hitler nodded without smiling, and it occurred to Dak that he had rarely seen any photo of the man smiling. He *could* smile, Dak assumed. The muscles worked the same as for anyone else, but he chose not to. He wanted to be seen as fierce, bold, and someone to fear. A wolf.



Hitler began to leave, then finally noticed Dak in the room. “Is this a houseboy for you?” he asked Von Roenne.

“I am considering whether to allow him to work for me,” Von Roenne answered. “At least, until he is old enough to train as a soldier.”

“He’s already old enough,” Hitler said. “We might not send him to war yet, but he can train now. From the Nazis, he must learn the true history of our people.”

Dak felt his muscles tightening and tried not to look angry. This man had nothing to teach him about history.

Hitler stepped closer and looked him over. “Your mother and father would be proud of you, boy, to hear that you have joined our great cause.”

“My parents have been missing for some time, sir,” Dak said. “I am alone.” The words echoed in his ears. He was the most alone he had ever been in his entire life. And not particularly comforted by the company he was currently keeping.

Hitler addressed Von Roenne. “When we own the youth, we own the future. Have this boy sent to begin his training tomorrow. I’ll personally find a place for him within the ranks of the Hitler Youth.”

“I won’t go.” Maybe it was stupid to speak, but on this issue, Dak refused to be silent.

Hitler opened his mouth to say something, probably to drag Dak kicking and screaming into those camps if necessary, but Von Roenne spoke first. “Pardon him, *mein Führer*, the boy only meant he cannot go. He owes me some work, and I know you expect our boys to pay their debts. Besides, he’ll get no better preparation to become a Nazi than with me.”

“Very well,” Hitler said, ignoring Dak again. “I expect your evaluation of Kuhlenthal’s papers by tomorrow.”

“It will be done,” Von Roenne said.

It took a full minute after Hitler left before Dak felt he could breathe normally again. Von Roenne had returned to his desk with Dak fixed in his gaze.

“Thank you,” Dak said.

Von Roenne didn’t flinch. He only continued to stare. It made Dak uncomfortable, and he shifted his weight.

Finally, Von Roenne spoke. “You may wonder why I kept you here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s because I cannot quite figure you out, and I’m curious. I believe you are telling me the truth about yourself, but not the whole truth.”

Dak stayed silent. If he had wanted to argue the point, he might have said he felt exactly the same way about Von Roenne.

“And if I were going to have a houseboy, I’d have preferred one who could safely leave this room to fetch me some tea.”

“There are other things I can do for you,” Dak said.

“Such as?”

Dak shuffled his feet on the floor a moment before speaking. Finally, he said, “I’m a Hystorian. I know a lot about the past . . . and the future.” It was a risk to say that, and he knew Riq would be punching him right now to hear Dak identify himself so openly to a high-level Nazi. But he had to know if Von Roenne was on his side.

Von Roenne only arched an eyebrow and said, “A historian? Well, boy, you may know the past, but the future has yet to be written.”

Dak felt deflated to hear that. At least Von Roenne wasn’t SQ, or he’d have known what Dak was talking about, but he wasn’t a Hystorian either.

“All right,” Von Roenne added. “If you’re a historian, then perhaps you can be helpful when Major Kuhlenthal arrives tonight. In the meantime, you can make yourself useful and clean up my office. If the Führer returns and sees you resting, he will take you with him whether I

like it or not. And I promise that once he gets hold of your mind, he will never let it go.”

“Does he have your mind, sir?” Dak asked.

Von Roenne only looked back at him with a frown, and then returned to his work at his desk.

And that was really the big question, Dak figured. Because if Von Roenne was as loyal to Hitler as he claimed to be, then Dak didn't stand a chance.



## Out of the Frying Pan

DUSK WAS setting in once Riq awoke to the announcement that the train's conductor would be coming through the cabin soon to check passports. He hadn't asked for them at France, and so Riq had forgotten about the chance they might be needed. But if they were caught on board without passports, they risked being arrested in Berlin. An image of the concentration camps passed through his mind. The horrors that happened there were hard enough to have read about in school. He didn't want to see them. And he couldn't let the Nazis get the Infinity Ring.

Sera had also been awoken by the announcement and was barely halfway through a yawn when Riq grabbed her hand. "C'mon."

Sera followed him out of her seat. "Where are we going?"

"You heard the conductor. He's coming to look at passports."

"Now? Are we in Berlin?"

"No, but by the time the conductor checks all the passengers, we will be."

The passenger cars were connected to one another by covered vestibules that made it safe to move from one car to another. As the conductor entered their car from the front, Riq pressed Sera toward the vestibule behind them.

“We can’t avoid him forever,” Sera mumbled. “And we’re almost at the back of the train anyway.”

“Don’t worry,” Riq said. “I have an idea.”

Once they were in the vestibule, Riq shut the connecting doors. The vestibule was constructed of thick steel, but an access door was provided to allow engineers in and out in case of emergencies. As far as Riq was concerned, this was a pretty serious emergency. The clatter of the train upon the tracks was louder here, which didn’t make it any easier to do what had to be done next. He pulled the door’s lever, hoping it wouldn’t alert the engineer as would happen on a modern train, and then slid the door open.

Sera stared down at the ground, moving so fast the rocks and brush were just a blur beneath them. “You’re crazy if you think I’m gonna jump.”

“We’re not jumping,” Riq said. “But when we boarded, I noticed a ladder on the back of this train. You just have to swing your body around to reach it. I’ll hold on to you and keep you safe. Then you help me get onto the ladder. We’ll ride the rest of the way from there.”

Sera smirked. “Jump onto a ladder while we’re moving at a hundred miles an hour? What happens to our kinetic energy if we fall?”

“Forget physics and ask yourself what happens when that conductor asks for our passports.”

“Better to be arrested than do a high-speed hello to the ground!”

Voices from inside the car in front of them grew loud enough to be heard even from where Riq stood. He and Sera peered through a small window and saw two young men standing in the aisle. “No passports!” The conductor blew on a whistle and immediately two Nazi soldiers entered. They each grabbed one of the young men and roughly escorted them into a forward car. Riq didn’t even want to think about what would happen to them next.

“That’ll be us if we don’t get on that ladder,” Riq whispered.

He and Sera darted back from the window as the conductor looked their way. Riq doubted he could have seen them — it was dark in the vestibule, so they should've been lost in the shadows. But then the conductor straightened his jacket and started walking toward them.

“Now!” Riq said.

He put his hands on Sera's waist and planted his feet to keep himself inside the vestibule while she leaned out from the train.

“I can see the ladder,” Sera said. “But I can't quite reach it.”

So Riq held Sera with one hand and with the other, he braced himself to lean even farther out of the vestibule. The train lurched over a bump in the tracks, and Sera was jolted out of his grasp.

“Sera!” he cried.

After a terrifying moment, she peeked back at him. “I almost fell just now. And just so you know, this is worse than all of Dak's bad ideas put together! Now give me your hand.”

Riq squeezed out of the train as far as he dared and slid the door most of the way closed behind him. With his longer arms, he reached over to the ladder without too much trouble and felt Sera's hands on his, supporting his weight as he swung toward her. Riq's feet slipped and slid on the ladder rung, but Sera immediately moved her hand to his belt and pulled him up until he was stable.

Riq tried to reach back to shut the door, but just as he did the conductor entered the vestibule. Riq motioned for Sera to climb, so they would be out of sight if the conductor somehow peered around the corner. They heard him grunt and pull the emergency door open wider. A long moment of silence followed while he was probably looking around for any sign of why it might be open. Finally, he closed the door and Riq was sure he heard it latch again.

Riq and Sera were near the top of the ladder now. Wind, dust, and occasional bits of gravel rushed at them, making it impossible to keep their eyes open, and it wasn't much easier to breathe.

“We’ll be safe here,” Riq said.

“If we don’t freeze or fall off or get whacked by something flying through the air first,” Sera said. “Anyone who knows Newton’s third law of motion knows how dangerous this is.”

“Uh, anyone who knows anything would know how dangerous this is,” Riq countered.

Sera adjusted her grip again. “I knew getting into Berlin would be hard, but I didn’t picture it like this.”

“That’s funny,” Riq said, “because when I pictured it, I thought things would be even worse.”

As the ride continued, Riq gradually changed his mind. It was better out here than under arrest by the Nazis, but not easier. His shoulder, which had finally stopped bothering him from when he dislocated it in Baghdad, was starting to ache again. His eyes were dry and dusty, and he had so much grit in his mouth he could taste it. But Sera was holding on tight with her elbows locked on the ladder and face nestled into her shoulder. She didn’t complain or whine, even though he knew her arms must be getting as tired as his were. If she didn’t complain, he knew he couldn’t either. At least, not out loud.

At last, the train began to slow as it pulled into a station just outside Berlin. Riq and Sera jumped from the ladder before it had completely stopped so they would be out of sight from the people standing on the platform. Looking back over his shoulder as they walked off, Riq decided that was a good idea anyway. He saw a lot of Nazi uniforms on the platform and was in no hurry to get any closer to them.

Then one of the Nazis looked directly at them and whispered to the others with him. They turned to look at Riq and Sera and one of them reached for the baton at his waist.

“We’ve got trouble.” Riq grabbed Sera’s arm and started to lead her away. “Just act casual.”

“Casual?” Sera hissed. “Nazi soldiers are watching us and you want me to act casual?”

Pretending to wave to someone on the train, Riq turned momentarily and saw the soldiers picking up speed behind them. Casual wasn’t going to work. This was quickly turning into a full-scale reason to panic.

“Get ready to run on three,” he muttered to Sera. “One. Two. Now!”

Sera was already on her way when he took off. But where were they supposed to go?

“Over here!” A woman stood in front of a small alcove. She was Sera’s height and wore a tight bun, and she carried with her a black umbrella that she opened and held behind her. “Get behind me!”

Riq looked at Sera, who shrugged and got behind the wide umbrella. He wasn’t sure it was safe, but he knew for a fact that getting caught by the Nazis was worse. So he followed and stood with Sera, both of them pressed tightly against the wall.

“*Guten Abend*,” an officer said to the woman. Riq’s translator had kicked in by then, but he already knew that was the phrase for “good evening.” The officer continued, “Have you seen two children run past here, a boy and girl? They snuck rides on the train.”

“I did see them!” The woman pointed down the platform. “They ran that way only a minute ago. If you hurry, you’ll catch them!”

When the officers had run past, the woman lowered her umbrella and turned to them. “Stole a ride aboard a train?”

“No!” Sera said. “We had tickets. We just . . . we just had a problem along the way.”

The woman pressed her thin lips together until they nearly disappeared, and then said, “The Nazis should have more important work than chasing children around. Be more careful next time, my dears.”

She started to walk away, but Riq said, “Maybe you can help us again.” He pulled out a paper from his pocket with an address written on it for the Abwehr Headquarters in Berlin. As the headquarters for



German spies, this was where Kuhlenthal would take Major Martin's papers. It was also where Dak had planned to go. Riq held the paper out to the woman. "Can you tell us how to get here?"

She looked at the address. "Abwehr? That's no place for children. Especially at night."

Sera's hand went to the sack holding the Infinity Ring. "We're only meeting a friend near there. Nothing special."

Now the woman smiled down at them. "It's nearly curfew, and you shouldn't be out on the streets. You'll never make it there on time."

Riq eyed Sera. "Maybe we could sleep here at the train station tonight."

Sera's expression begged Riq to find another way. He knew she was worried about Dak, and she was right. They couldn't stay here.

The woman puckered her lips while she thought, then said, "My husband is waiting outside with our car. I suppose we could drive you to the headquarters, if you are sure your friend will be there to meet you."

"We'll be able to find him," Riq said, as much for Sera's benefit as the woman's.

The woman escorted Riq and Sera out of the train station and led them to a car waiting near the curb. After she talked to her husband through the window, she nodded at them and opened the door to the backseat, ushering them forward.

Riq began to climb in, then froze. Behind him, Sera did the exact same thing.

Already seated inside, another woman lowered a mirror as she finished applying oil-black lipstick around her mouth. She eyed the kids with a cold glare that turned Riq's feet to ice.

"Get in," she said. "We've been waiting for you."



## Into the Fire

SERA'S INSTINCT was to run, and she knew Riq would be right on her heels. But before she could move, the driver stepped from the car to stand directly behind her, casting an imposing shadow. It was Anton, and he pushed both her and Riq forward, forcing them into the car. She considered yelling for help, but who was going to come? Those Nazis? They weren't any better.

Riq went in first and Sera sat against the outside door. Quietly, she slipped the Infinity Ring's bag between her seat and the door. If they had a chance during the ride, she would pass it to Riq to slip inside his jacket, where it would be less noticeable.

"Where are you taking us?" Riq asked.

"Abwehr Headquarters," Tilda said. "Isn't that where you wanted to go? Isn't that where we'll find your friend Dak?"

"We've already found him!" the woman with the bun said from the front seat. "The minute he steps out of Colonel Von Roenne's office, he's ours."

"But he isn't stepping out of there," Tilda said. "You had plenty of chances before! That boy is smarter than you gave him credit for, Cleo."

"It's not that," Anton said. "We can't just go wherever we want in the building. Even the SQ doesn't have that kind of freedom with the Nazis."

“But an eleven-year-old boy does?” Tilda asked. “Well, it doesn’t matter now, because once Dak knows I have his two best friends, he’ll do anything to save them.” Her eyes flicked to Sera and Riq. “He’ll even undo all the damage I’m sure you three kids have caused here.”

“We’re only fixing history back to how it’s supposed to be!” Sera said. “It’s the SQ that interfered.”

“Anton and I have been spying on the British for years,” the woman said. “And we’ve been spying on the Nazis since their rise to power. All of this was so that when the time came for us to turn the war to the advantage of the SQ, we would be ready. Nobody will win this conflict but us!”

“You’re destroying the world!” Riq yelled. “Every time you pull history off course from how things are supposed to be, you destroy it a little more.”

“I can save it,” Tilda said. “I have the tools now . . . with me as the head of the SQ, not only in our present time, but in the past and for all of the future.”

“There is no future,” Sera said. “Not unless you let us go.”

Tilda was joined in her laughter by the man and woman in the front seat. “Let you go?” Tilda asked. “After so much trouble to find you, why would I do that? I’ve been waiting for years to find you.”

“Years?” Sera asked. That didn’t make sense.

“In your travels, you went to the year 1850, in America,” Tilda said. “Do you remember?”

Of course Sera remembered. In their work to save Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, they had also played a role in saving one of Riq’s relatives. When Riq saved Kissy and John from the SQ, he had done more than change their history. He had changed his own.

Sera turned to stare at Riq as all the pieces of his secret fell into place in her mind. Suddenly, she understood why he had refused to return to the present to get a new Square. Why he acted so gloomy every time

they talked of their future lives. And why his Remnants were like black holes.

To save history, Riq might already have sacrificed himself.

He looked back at her, and without a word seemed to know why the tears had welled in her eyes. He only smiled grimly and gave her hand a squeeze.

“So what if we were in 1850?” Riq asked. “We’ve been a lot of places.”

“Yes, but you met someone there,” Tilda said. “Someone very important to me.”

“Ilsa,” Sera whispered.

Speaking the name sent a shudder down her spine. Ilsa had nearly destroyed the entire Underground Railroad. But even worse, she had gotten hold of the Infinity Ring long enough to travel forward in time with Sera to see the Cataclysm. Rarely a night passed when Sera didn’t have a nightmare connected with what she had seen.

“Ilsa is my great-great-great-grandmother,” Tilda explained. “Not the first in our family to be SQ, but certainly a fine role model to me.”

“And are your other role models vultures and snakes?” Riq asked. “Because you seem to have a lot in common with them, too.”

Tilda ignored him and continued. “After Ilsa had her experience of time travel with you, she wrote a letter about everything she knew, everything she had seen. It was passed to her daughter, and to hers, and so on, and eventually came to me. I never understood what it all meant, until after you disappeared from Hystorian headquarters. I was ready for you the next time you returned.”

“If Ilsa wrote that letter, then she must have explained what the future is like,” Sera said.

“Of course she did,” Tilda said. “And now I know how to prevent it. I must destroy Aristotle, the interfering fool who started the Hystorians in the first place. If the Hystorians are not there to oppose the SQ at

every turn, we can set history on its proper course much earlier and avoid all these Breaks you people like to go on about.”

“That’s not how it works,” Sera said. “You’ve got it all backward.”

Tilda only laughed. “Believe what you will, Sera. But the best thing you can do is give up now. Let Dak trade away this war to get you and Riq back, and then you three find a cozy place in time to enjoy the rest of your lives. It’s better that way.”

“I can’t do that,” Sera said fiercely. “I have to save history. And even if my parents are SQ, I still have to save them.”

Riq flinched with surprise, turning his head toward Sera, but this time she wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Can you?” Tilda asked. “How can you possibly save them from me?”

Sera slumped in her seat. For all they had been through, all they had done, Tilda’s question sat like a weight on Sera’s chest. She wasn’t sure that anything could save her and Riq, her parents, or the entire world from what Tilda was about to do.



## **The Plan Falls Apart**

IT WAS late when the knock came to Colonel Von Roenne's office. When he heard it, Dak was on the floor in the corner of the room, sorting papers for filing, and trying very hard not to stop and read the pages full of fascinating history. As the man entered, Dak knew immediately who it was: Major Kuhlenthal.

Dak knew about the major from the many history books he'd read on World War II. Following Kuhlenthal's identification of Mincemeat Man as a fraud, he had been selected as one of Hitler's top officers. From that new position, the SQ had been able to manipulate him to get everything they wanted. He had gone on to destroy the Allies in future battles at Normandy and Russia, and even helped defeat the U.S. Marines as far away as Iwo Jima in Japan.

But here, in 1943, Major Kuhlenthal was still a mid-level spy delivering his report on Mincemeat Man to his superiors. If Sera and Riq had done their jobs, then Kuhlenthal believed Major Martin was real and would recommend pulling military forces out of Sicily to defend Greece. It would then be up to Dak to ensure that Germany followed Kuhlenthal's advice. But if Sera and Riq had failed, there would be little Dak could do to persuade anyone otherwise.

Dak stood when Kuhlenthal entered the room and the two men exchanged a “Heil Hitler” with their outstretched right arms. When Kuhlenthal was ordered at ease, Dak quickly knelt down again to continue his work on the files. He hoped Von Roenne had forgotten about him, or at least wouldn’t make him leave. He hadn’t seen Cleo and Anton for a while, but then he hadn’t exactly left this room either. He knew they were out there somewhere, looking for a way to get him.

While glaring at Dak, Kuhlenthal said to Von Roenne, “I have the news we’ve been waiting for. Perhaps we should discuss it privately.”

“He’s a child,” Von Roenne said dismissively, retaking his seat. “And he has much to learn from me. Let’s have the news at once. The Führer is becoming anxious.”

“He should be anxious,” Kuhlenthal said. “The rumors you’ve heard are true. The Allied target isn’t Sicily. It’s Greece.”

Dak’s ears perked up — literally; he thought they might have risen a little higher, like a dog’s — but he kept his head bent low and continued working. Kuhlenthal handed Von Roenne a folder and then sat across the desk from him.

There was silence while Von Roenne filed through the papers, and Dak saw from the corner of his eye that several photos were included, too. To his curious brain, not being able to look at the photos was torture. It was like putting a chef in a gourmet restaurant and telling him not to taste the food.

With his eyes still on the report in front of him, Von Roenne said, “Is there any chance the British will know we’ve seen these papers?”

“None.” Kuhlenthal smiled, pleased with himself. “They’ll have their papers back tomorrow in their original condition and will never know we have copies. I could fool them with one eye shut.”

“The British aren’t stupid,” Von Roenne scolded. “With both eyes open, tell me if this Major Martin is real.”

Kuhlenthal sat up even straighter. "I can assure you, sir. Major Martin is a drowned British officer who was carrying top secret military plans. My report is a guarantee of Germany's success in this war!"

If he had meant to impress Von Roenne with that speech, he was going to be disappointed. Dak heard the Colonel "hmp" and turn to another page.

"Your report says survivors of the crash are being interrogated?" he asked. "Interesting."

Dak smirked. There were no other survivors, because there had never been a plane crash. Kuhlenthal was exaggerating, probably in the hope of making his report more believable.

Eventually, Von Roenne closed the report and handed it back to Kuhlenthal. "Very well. I am sure you'll show that report to the other officers here. I will send my recommendation to the Führer by tomorrow morning."

Kuhlenthal stood, but did not leave. When he had the colonel's attention, he said, "Sir, the Führer will listen to your advice more than anyone's. He wants good news from us, not bad. If the report is true, then we will have a major victory against the Allies."

"The Führer wants *accurate* news from us," Von Roenne said sharply. "That is our duty, and nothing more."

"Yes, Colonel." Kuhlenthal saluted, tucked the report under his arm, and then left, closing the door behind him.

As soon as he'd left, Von Roenne leaned back in his chair and pressed his fingers to his temples as if a headache had come on. Dak could understand that. Ten minutes in Kuhlenthal's company and he had a headache, too.

"I know you overheard that," Von Roenne muttered to Dak. "You say that you know a lot about history. So, tell me: Is this real? Or is this a Trojan horse? A way for the British to fool us as they plan to invade Sicily?"



Dak stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. He felt a little torn in what he should say. He had grown to like Colonel Von Roenne. If Von Roenne gave bad advice to Hitler, he would have to pay the consequences. But Dak reminded himself that Von Roenne was still a Nazi, still on the wrong side of this war, and that as a spy, it was Dak's job to ignore his feelings and complete the mission. If Germany left Sicily, thousands of lives could be saved in this war, not to mention saving Earth from the Cataclysm.

"Well, what should I advise?" Von Roenne asked. "How will my choice tonight be remembered by history?"

"History teaches us that people who make the brave choices are heroes." Dak sat up straighter. "We study history to know the stories of those who stood face-to-face with real villains and won. We study history so that when it's time for us to make the hard choice, we'll know that we can do it, too."

Silence fell in the room for a moment. Dak thought about how he'd felt as they traveled through time, changing history, in some cases totally reversing the way things would be remembered. He'd felt more and more off-balance to realize that so much of what he knew, or thought he knew, about history would be different once he returned home.

"That was quite a speech," Von Roenne said softly.

"The past is easy for me," Dak said. "It's knowing the future that gives me trouble."

But then it hit him. History wasn't just about understanding the past. It was about understanding the future, *his* future. It was about having the tools to shape the future. And all he had to know was that when it came time for him to make choices, he would make the heroic choice, just as the greatest people throughout history had done. No matter what changed in the past, his future hadn't yet been written. He had to shape it, bit by bit.

With the right choices, the Cataclysm could still be avoided. Sera could bring her parents back, he could save his parents within the time warp, and Riq could — well, Riq could do whatever it was that Riq did.

*“Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is,”* Von Roenne said. “It’s an old German saying.”

The image of Adolf Hitler’s face came to Dak’s mind. Hitler called himself the wolf. He wanted people to be afraid of him, to make the weaker choice.

“Germany should move its forces to Greece,” Dak finally said. “That’s what you should recommend.”

“But there’s only one problem,” Von Roenne said. “Major Martin’s papers are fakes. I know it, and I have a feeling that you know it, too.”

Dak felt as stunned as if Von Roenne had hit him. But before he could speak, Von Roenne said, “There’s a bright light shining in my windows; I think a car outside has left its lights on. Go close the curtains.”

Dak shuffled toward the window, walking slowly to give himself a chance to think what he should say next. When he came to the window, the lights of the car turned off, allowing Dak to see the people on the grass below.

Sera and Riq were there, staring up at him with their hands tied behind their backs. Cleo and Anton stood directly behind them, looking far too eager to cause some damage. And getting out of the car was Tilda. She brushed a hand down Sera’s hair, which would’ve looked motherly if Sera hadn’t flinched and batted Tilda’s hand away with her shoulder. When she saw Dak staring down at them, Tilda pointed directly at him. Her index finger signaled him to come down to her, and the expression in her hollow eyes was perfectly clear. Either Dak would make an appearance right then to Tilda, or Sera and Riq were mincemeat.



## Tilda and the Time Machine

“I’LL GET you that tea,” Dak said as he started to leave Von Roenne’s office.

“What tea?”

“You asked for some tea like three hours ago. I’ll go get it now.”

Von Roenne called after him, but Dak was already halfway down the hall, then racing down the stairs and out the door. He jogged across the lawn, stopping far enough from the group that he could talk to them without being seized.

Riq shook his head when he saw Dak coming, but Sera looked relieved. At the moment, Dak wasn’t entirely sure if he had made the right decision by coming out here. Obviously, he had to help his friends, but maybe he should’ve thought of some cool rescue plan first, like swooping in from above, snatching them in his arms, and flying away.

On second thought, a plan like that would’ve required superpowers, which were hard to come by. He’d have to trust in his ability to improvise.

“Menacing, interfering kids!” Tilda said. “We are so close to controlling both sides in this war. Don’t you know how important this night is for the SQ?”

Dak rolled his eyes. Well, duh, obviously he knew.

“Don’t you know how important this night is for the Hystorians?” he countered. “After tonight, the SQ will be on the road to collapse.”

Tilda laughed. “The SQ is more powerful than ever right now, thanks to you!”

Dak’s eyes darted to Sera, who still had the Infinity Ring’s sack around her waist. So Tilda didn’t have it . . . yet.

Tilda walked over to Dak. “We’re going back inside those headquarters now. You’re going to tell Colonel Von Roenne that you’ve been spying on him and that Mincemeat Man is a lie. You will do this, or you know what’ll happen to your friends.”

“No,” Riq said. “Save history, not me. It’s okay, Dak. I’m a Hystorian.” Beside him, Sera nodded, and Dak couldn’t have been prouder in that moment to have them for friends.

“We’re all Hystorians,” Dak said. “And I won’t help you now.”

“Yes, you will!” Angrily, Tilda grabbed Dak’s arm.

Something happened when she did. Something he had experienced only once before, when he and Sera had returned to the future. Almost as if a bolt of electricity had shot through him, Dak collapsed to the ground, shivering with cold and nearly incoherent.

Somewhere in the background, he heard Sera scream. Tilda stood over him like a drooling attack dog, shouting to the others that it was only a Remnant and it would pass.

She was right about that. The pain was already receding, the worst of the icy chills. But he was still shivering and still left with the horrible feeling that the Cataclysm was coming sooner than ever. Somehow, he knew that Tilda was right — the SQ had the upper hand now. He didn’t understand how that could be possible, but the one thing he was certain about made his blood run cold:

Dak’s Remnant was the knowledge that the destruction of the world was his fault.



By the time Dak gathered his wits, he was being carried into headquarters over Anton's shoulder. His hands were tied behind his back just as Sera's and Riq's were. Tilda and Cleo were marching on either side of him, with Riq and Sera just ahead. He didn't remember anyone deciding they should all go inside together, but he was glad they had. Whatever was going to happen next, he wanted Riq and Sera with him. If they succeeded or failed, they would do it together.

Cleo led them to a room near the kitchen, which she said wouldn't be in use this time of night. They went inside, and Anton dumped Dak on the floor, then ordered Riq and Sera to sit beside him. Sera pressed her shoulder against his in a sign of sympathy, and Riq gave him a bump in the ribs with his elbow. He felt better just having them around.

"Fetch Colonel Von Roenne," Tilda ordered Cleo and Anton. "Whether Dak confesses or not, I can give him the evidence of their interference."

There wasn't much Dak could say to that. Tilda could easily prove they had interfered with this time line, and Von Roenne obviously wouldn't betray his own country to help him.

Colonel Alexis Von Roenne. Maybe in a strange way, the Remnant had started to clear Dak's mind. Wiped it clean of everything, except for what he needed to know to finish this mission. Suddenly, Dak knew that name's place in history.

With Cleo and Anton on their errand, Tilda found a chair and sat cross-legged on it. She withdrew a hand grenade and tossed it from one hand to the other in a way that made him nervous. Those things weren't toys.

"Blow us up now and you'll go with us," Riq said.

"Give me some credit," Tilda snapped. "I know how to use a grenade." But she stopped tossing it between her hands.

“In World War Two, the Americans designed a grenade about the size of a baseball.” The fact spilled from Dak’s mouth before he could stop himself. “They figured since any American boy could throw a baseball, he could throw a grenade, too.”

“I’ve never played baseball,” Tilda said.

“What a shocker,” Sera whispered.

Tilda glared at them, then said, “Things may go easier for you if you confess to the colonel. Maybe it will only be the concentration camps instead of your executions.”

“The concentration camps were just a slower form of execution,” Dak said.

Tilda nodded. “They were. But they are only the beginning if the SQ takes control of this war. Just imagine the possibilities.”

“Even you couldn’t be that cruel,” Sera said.

“Are you sure?” Tilda laughed. “Do you want to know how cruel I can be? Cruel enough to take a mother and father from their infant daughter and enjoy the fact that she will grow up never knowing them. I wish you could ask your parents about that day, Sera. But I’m afraid you’ll never have the chance.”

Beside him, Dak felt the muscles in Sera’s arm tighten, but she said nothing.

“Why would you take them?” Dak asked. “If they were loyal SQ —”

“I never said they were loyal!” Tilda snapped. “But the SQ has them again, and you will never see them. Not alive anyway.”

“You’d better let them go,” Dak yelled. “Or I’ll —”

“Or you’ll what? Time travel somewhere? You can’t even get the hang of it well enough to find your own parents.” Tilda’s grin turned wicked. “But I know where they are. They have no idea what’s coming for them next. But I do.”

Dak squirmed. How could Tilda talk so confidently about time travel? Maybe she had gotten back to 1943 with their Infinity Ring, but

she couldn't go anywhere else. However, she didn't seem to think she was stuck here at all.

Sera had the answer. "You have your own Infinity Ring, don't you?"

Riq and Dak exchanged glances, both raising eyebrows to the other. But Sera remained focused on Tilda.

"You knew where I'd hidden our Infinity Ring and you broke into the locker," Sera said. "You used a strand of my hair to trick the device's DNA detector, and then must've gone back to the future to have the SQ replicate our Infinity Ring."

"I prefer to call it the Eternity Ring, actually," Tilda said.

"Regardless, it took us months. The technology was more complicated than we had expected. We're surprised a girl of your age can operate it."

"Never underestimate a girl who knows science," Sera said. "Or for that matter, a history or language genius either."

For the first time, Riq spoke up. "Once you had your own Infinity Ring, you returned ours to the very same place and time we had left it. But why? You could've just kept ours and stranded us here."

Tilda nodded at Sera. "We wanted to see where you would go next, follow you through history and destroy the Hystorians one by one. Unfortunately, you figured out our plan, so I'm afraid it'll have to change. Your journey through time ends tonight . . . permanently."

"If that's the case, I figure we have nothing to lose," Riq said. And before Dak was fully aware of what was happening, Riq slid his tied hands under his body and was on his feet, rushing at Tilda.

Sera joined in. Her hands were still behind her, but she got in a good kick that toppled Tilda's chair over backward. The grenade that had been in her hands rolled into a corner. For his part, Dak tried doing the same move as Riq, but his hands got caught between his legs, which forced him to hunch over and hop around like some sort of deranged rabbit.

Caught off guard, Tilda toppled over on the floor. Sera knelt on one of the woman's arms, pinning it down, and Riq wrested a purse away

from Tilda's other arm. After a little more hopping, Dak got his arms entirely in front of him and rushed to join his friends. Riq pulled the new Infinity Ring — the Eternity Ring — from Tilda's purse, causing her to yell in anger. She clutched at Riq, leaving a nasty scratch up his arm. But he grabbed her hand and kicked the Ring toward Dak.

“Destroy it!” Riq yelled. “Smash it, Dak!”

The Eternity Ring was made of a blue metal and glowed wherever someone grabbed on to it. But in all other ways, it seemed to be the same as the original one. Dak picked up Tilda's Ring and ran to a corner of the room, where he began hitting it against the ground. It dented and a screw wobbled in place, but the thing was built pretty solid. That figured. The SQ finally made a quality product, and it was the one thing he needed to break!

He raised up his arms again and hurled the Eternity Ring onto the ground with all his strength. He heard a crash of glass, but then Tilda rose up and grabbed him around the throat. Riq and Sera were fighting her from behind, but Tilda was much stronger than she looked and was holding her own against the three kids.

If he could only get the grenade, he could affix it to the device and warp it away. That would destroy it. But Tilda was still choking him, and the room around him was starting to fade.

“Stop this!” a voice commanded.

Everyone froze and turned to look at Von Roenne standing in the doorway with Cleo and Anton ahead of him, and two Nazi soldiers at his sides.

Dak, Sera, and Riq scooted to the other side of the room as Cleo and Anton rushed to Tilda and Von Roenne stepped inside. His face was a deep shade of red and his chest heaved with anger. “Somebody explain this to me at once!”

Tilda spoke first. “These children attacked me.”



“Did they? And whose weapon is this?” Von Roenne bent over and picked the grenade up off the floor, then carefully handed it to one of the soldiers.

Tilda looked insulted at that, but only said, “I was trying to hold them here for arrest while my friends went to find you.”

“Arrest?” Von Roenne said. “On what charge?”

“Spying,” Anton said. “Colonel Von Roenne, we’ve been after Dak since the moment he wormed his way inside this building. He’s working for the British.”

“Not true!” Dak said. Okay, yes, he was spying, but not for the British. He was working for the Hystorians.

“This other boy and girl are spies, too,” Cleo said. “The boy was in Britain, helping translate languages.”

“Translate this,” Riq said defiantly. “*Jus pasmirsti kaip supuvusia surio!*”

Dak chuckled as his decoder picked up the phrase spoken in Lithuanian, which said, “You stink like rotten cheese!” Even if he kind of thought of that as a compliment, he knew Cleo wouldn’t.

But she ignored Riq and pointed to Sera. “And this girl was in Spain, attempting to convince your spies that the body of Major Martin is that of a real British officer.”

Von Roenne raised an eyebrow. “Ah, I heard about you. You children all work together, then?”

“We’re on the right side of history,” Dak said. “Are you?”

Without answering, Von Roenne turned to Cleo and Anton. “You captured these spies. What do you want in reward?”

They looked at each other. Anton cleared his throat and then said, “We represent an organization that has existed for hundreds of years and stretches all over this world. In exchange for capturing these spies, we want a meeting with your Führer. He needs to know how things are going to work between us from now on.”

“Then you are not Nazis?” Von Roenne asked.

“We don’t have time for this!” Tilda said. “Let’s just go!”

But Anton was already speaking. “We are greater than the Nazis, more powerful. We will be around long after you’re gone. We are the SQ, and our time has come at last!”



## Von Roenne's Choice

SERA WAS horrified at the thought of the SQ taking over the world here. She knew their organization was already in place wherever history was happening, and if Tilda had an Infinity Ring, their ability to create destruction whenever they wanted was far greater now.

Von Roenne seemed less impressed by Anton's posturing. "I don't know the SQ's power," he said, "but I do know ours." He turned to address the two Nazi soldiers with him. "Take these two away for questioning."

Cleo and Anton darted for the door in an attempt to escape, but the soldiers pressed them against the wall and placed them in handcuffs. Sera wasn't sure which was louder as they left, Cleo's wailing or Anton's yelling.

"Now, about you." Von Roenne turned to Tilda's corner of the room. Then he stopped. "But . . . where has she gone?"

Dak, Sera, and Riq looked the same way. Tilda had vanished. So had her Eternity Ring. Drops of amber liquid were on the ground — the fuel that powered the Rings. Wherever she had gone, she wouldn't get far unless she could get more fuel. But she had definitely left 1943 Germany. And was no doubt already at work on the next phase of her plan.

Von Roenne's eyes narrowed, and he closed the door behind him. "You are no ordinary spies, correct?"

"We're not spies at all," Riq said. "Just travelers, trying to be sure that history goes the way it should."

"Ah, there's that word *history* again." Von Roenne turned to Dak. "And when you say you are a historian, there's something more to that word, too, I assume."

"The way we think of Hystorians, yes, sir," Dak said.

"I have already heard from other officers who have seen Major Kuhlenthal's report. Most of them believe everything he says. Hitler has asked for my opinion now, to tip the scales in either direction."

Sera frowned. "Hitler trusts you that much?"

"Yes!" Dak piped up. There was a light in his eye that Sera recognized. Dak had remembered another history fact. "He trusts you, even with his own life, Colonel — you know he does. Or, um, you *will* know that he does, eventually."

"What do you mean?" Von Roenne asked.

"I know now why it's been so hard for me to remember who you are, sir. It's because you wanted to be forgotten. You've tried to do what you think is right and hope nobody notices — because doing what's *right* can sometimes be very dangerous."

Von Roenne's eyes shifted. "What danger?"

Dak sighed. "You believe in Germany, but not in Adolf Hitler, and certainly not the horrible things he's doing in this war. In your own way, you're a spy, too."

"How dare you —"

"There are a lot of good Germans who don't like what is happening here. You're one of them. There's a secret movement to overthrow the Nazis from within. And you're a part of it, aren't you?"

Von Roenne's eyes softened. "I only wish to save lives. Thousands have already died needlessly."

Dak walked over to Von Roenne. “Just as you want to save lives, my friends and I are trying to save history. We both have to do what we know is right. Colonel, you must do the right thing with Major Kuhlenthal’s report.”

“Germany must leave Sicily undefended,” Von Roenne whispered. “I must convince Hitler to move our armies to Greece, even though I know the Allies are on their way to Sicily.”

“Yes, sir,” Dak said.

“And how will history remember me for this?” Von Roenne asked. “You talk as if you already know.”

“History will say you were one of the rare men to stare evil in its face and refuse to back down,” Dak said. “They will call you a hero.”

A knock came to the door and everyone turned. “Colonel Von Roenne,” the voice on the other side said. “The Führer has requested you come to meet with him at once.”

Von Roenne smiled at Dak, Sera, and Riq. Then he turned to face the door and said, “Tell him I am on my way. I have good news.”

Sera later wondered what his expression was when he looked back their way again to say good-bye. She would never know for sure, because by that time, the three of them had already warped away.



## The Sicily Aftermath

SERA, RIQ, and Dak squeezed from the warp like toothpaste from the tube. They each lay on the ground for a few minutes, recovering from the pinch of time. Gradually, Riq realized they were on sand, and that the sounds of waves crashing onto shore weren't far away. It was perfectly warm and, wherever they were, he was in no hurry to leave.

"I really hate time travel," Dak said. "Does anyone else feel like their head was stepped on by a giant?"

"Your head looks like it was." Riq grinned when he said it, but in truth, his entire body felt that same way. He shook out his hands and feet, hoping to get the blood moving again.

Sera groaned as she pulled into a sitting position. "I have an idea, Dak. Let's go forward in time to when your parents invented this stupid thing and tell them to create more *comfortable* time travel."

"Comfort. So *that's* the missing piece," Dak said. Eventually, he rolled to his side and pushed himself up beside her. "When are we, dudes?"

Sera pointed across the sea to an island where British and American flags could be seen, even from here. "That's Sicily."

"Oh, yeah?" Riq sat beside her. "So, the Allies took the island?"

"What year is it?" Dak asked.

“Still 1943,” Sera said. “But I sent us forward only a month or two, just to be sure Tilda didn’t ruin anything after we left.”

Riq got to his feet and wandered to a beachside garbage can. A wadded-up newspaper was inside, right on the top. It had a little sauce on it from whoever had used it to wrap their lunch, but was mostly still readable. Well, readable for anyone who was fluent in Italian. Riq smiled. He’d had that language down while other kids were still learning their ABCs.

Dak looked over his shoulder and pointed out the one word he could read: *Mussolini*. “Dictator of Italy,” Dak said. “This should be interesting.”

Riq spread the newspaper’s front page out flat while Dak and Sera found rocks to hold it down against the breeze. The date across the top read July 25, 1943. Riq cleared his throat and translated the headline: “*After Failure in Sicily, Mussolini Arrested, Forced to Resign.*”

“So Hitler lost his closest ally,” Dak said. “Losing him will be a huge blow to Germany.”

They bumped heads together while Riq continued translating the article for his friends. The Allied attack on Sicily was described as the largest water invasion in history. The article also suggested Germany’s defeat was even bigger than the Allies ever hoped for. Once they believed the Mincemeat Man trick, Germany had moved most of its troops over to Greece. Many of the soldiers who remained on Sicily were old, untrained, and cared more about fettuccine than fighting. On the first day of invasion, over a hundred thousand Allied troops had landed on Sicily, and many of the enemy soldiers didn’t even fire a single shot before surrendering. By the time Germany realized what was happening and sent reinforcements back to Sicily, the Allies had a firm hold on the island. Germany had lost one of its most important bases in the war. Better still, with Mussolini gone, many people believed Italy would begin fighting for the Allies.

The article went on to say that back in Germany, everyone was looking for someone to blame for this disaster.

“Look for Von Roenne’s name,” Dak said.

Riq scanned the article. He found Clauss, whom Sera explained had initially tried to sit in on Major Martin’s postmortem examination. He was facing some sort of discipline. So was Kuhlenthal, although he passed the blame back to Clauss. At least with this embarrassment, he’d never rise any further in power. Von Roenne’s name was briefly mentioned, but he said it was obvious the British plans had changed from what was written in Major Martin’s documents.

“He’s safe for a while,” Riq said. “Hitler won’t know he lied.”

“Von Roenne isn’t finished in this war,” Dak said. “The things he’ll do are going to save many more lives. He’ll be arrested before the war ends, but he’ll die as a hero.”

Riq thought about that for a moment. Von Roenne knew his place in history and didn’t run from it. He respected the colonel for that and hoped if he were ever called upon to do something truly great, he’d have the courage to stand and face it, too.

In his own way, maybe he already had.

“What’s the caption under this picture?” Sera pointed to a picture of German tanks that appeared to be in retreat.

Riq scanned the words, and then said, “Hitler is pulling back from planned attacks in other places.”

“I’ll bet that after Mincemeat Man, he doesn’t know what to trust anymore,” she said.

“Well, history did it again!” Dak said happily. “A future spy novelist dreams up an idea for a dead body, it’s all put together by a few dedicated people in a crowded basement room, and it ends up changing the course of an entire war.”

“Changing history,” Sera said. “We did it!”



“Hopefully, it’ll stay that way,” Riq said. “Don’t forget Tilda has a Ring now.”

“Unless she finds a way to save the rest of the fuel, she won’t get far,” Dak said. “I don’t think we’ll see her again.” He stood, brushed off his pants, and added, “Who’s ready for some more adventure? When are we going next?”

Sera pulled out the SQuare and punched in a few buttons, then looked up and smiled. “Looks like we’ll be seeing some old friends. Who’s ready for a return trip to Paris?”



## Epilogue

TILDA LANDED in her new time with a hard thump to her right shoulder. It stung for a moment until she remembered that pain was for the weak.

Beside her, the Eternity Ring had landed on a rock and was still humming. Not a good sign. That brat, Dak Smyth, had hit it hard, though at least it got her this far. The thing was leaking fuel, but if she kept it upright, she would have enough to do what must be done.

She picked up the Ring and noticed a shining coin on the ground nearby. The money she carried in her pockets would be worthless here, so even this single coin was helpful. Upon the coin was an image of the Greek goddess Athena — a good sign she was in the right place.

Tilda sat up and pulled a bedsheet from her purse and wrapped it around herself, then hid the Ring in its folds. Voices were coming, and she saw no need to invite questions from the locals.

“Well, howdy-do,” a man said, walking over to her. “Do you need help, ma’am?”

The woman with him seemed startled by Tilda’s appearance. At first, Tilda thought it was because the woman recognized her, but then she remembered this man and woman had never seen her before. The woman came closer, and they both helped Tilda to her feet.

Tilda smiled and thanked them with as much kindness as her oily voice could muster.

“Are you hurt?” the man asked. “We can help you get into town if you’d like.”

“Yes, please.” Tilda even bent over slightly to make herself look weak. In truth, she was holding the Eternity Ring to her chest and didn’t want it to be noticed. Not by these two.

As humble as she looked now, on the inside, Tilda was practically screeching with laughter. This would turn out to be the greatest joke of all time and yet she couldn’t share it with anyone . . . yet.

However, by the time Dak came to this time period, she’d be ready to let him know all about it. Only, he wouldn’t end up laughing at all.

The couple helping Tilda was Mr. and Mrs. Smyth, Dak’s parents. They were her ticket to revenge against Dak, Sera, and Riq. And to controlling time travel forever.

Tilda’s fun had only just begun.

**FOLLOW THE GUIDE**

**Infinity Ring • Episode 6**  
**HIDDEN TREASURES**  
**PARIS, 1790**



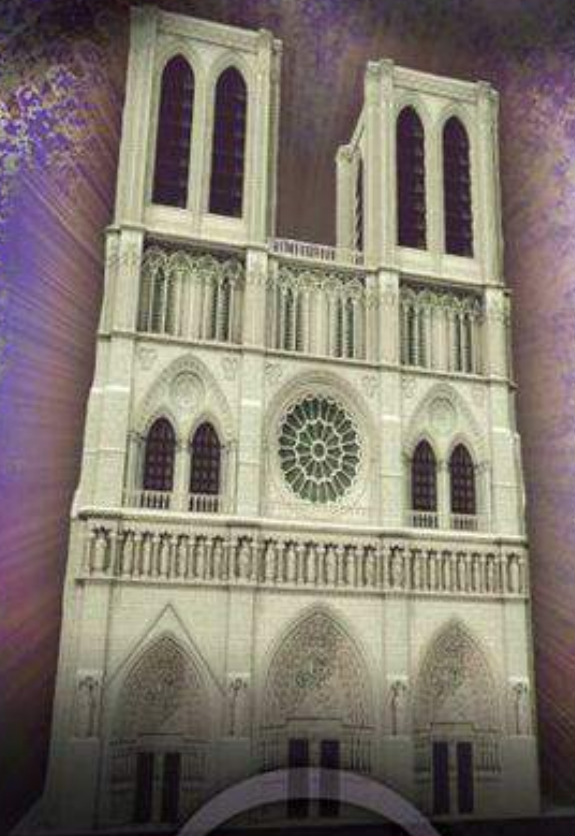
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# INFINITY RING™



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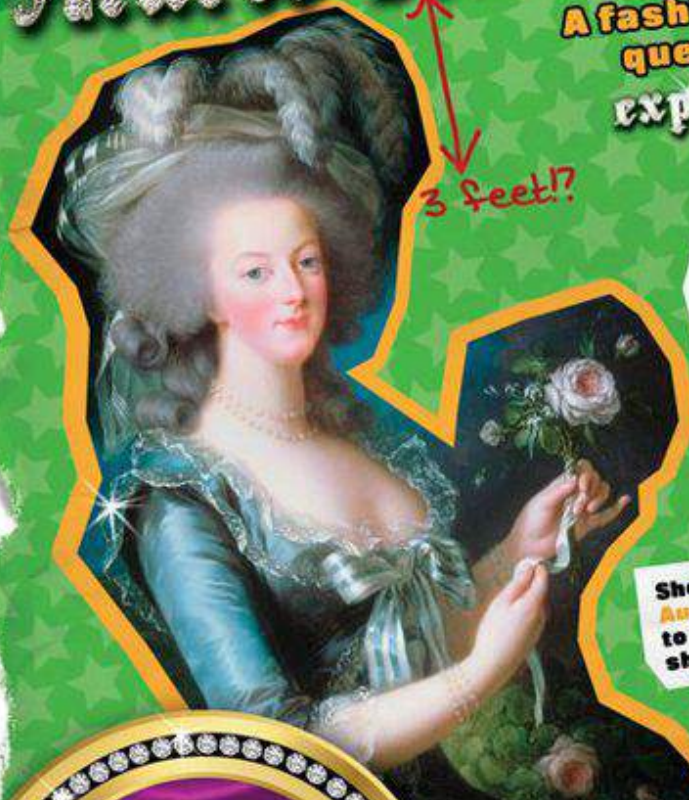
**It's 1790, and revolution is brewing in France. The people of Paris want to create a place of art and culture that is open to EVERYONE: the Louvre Museum. However, Queen Marie Antoinette worked with the SQ to steal some of the valuable art needed to create the museum. She has hidden it around the city. Can you infiltrate her clique and find the precious works of art?**

**— Arin**



# Marie Antoinette

A fashionable queen with expensive taste.



3 feet!

Her hairdos were elaborate—some almost three feet high!

She was born in Austria and came to France when she was 15.

Marie Antoinette loved the outdoors, especially horseback riding.



LOOK OUT FOR THIS GUY!

He's an aristocrat with a mean streak, and suspected to be SA.

Partners in crime



Paris at the time is crowded and smelly and dirty. The rich live in gorgeous luxurious palaces, and everyone else lives in squalor and filth.

## Simple Word Translations



### ENGLISH

Queen  
Diabolical Plot

Art  
Museum



### FRENCH

La Reine  
Un Complot  
Diabolique

L'art  
Le Musée

IHST MEIT OYU  
LIWL NDFI URO  
ULEG AREN HET  
TMKRAE.



A former king of France  
imported swans to Paris's Seine  
River in an attempt to make  
the city look fancier.



While in Paris, try some of  
the world's greatest breads!





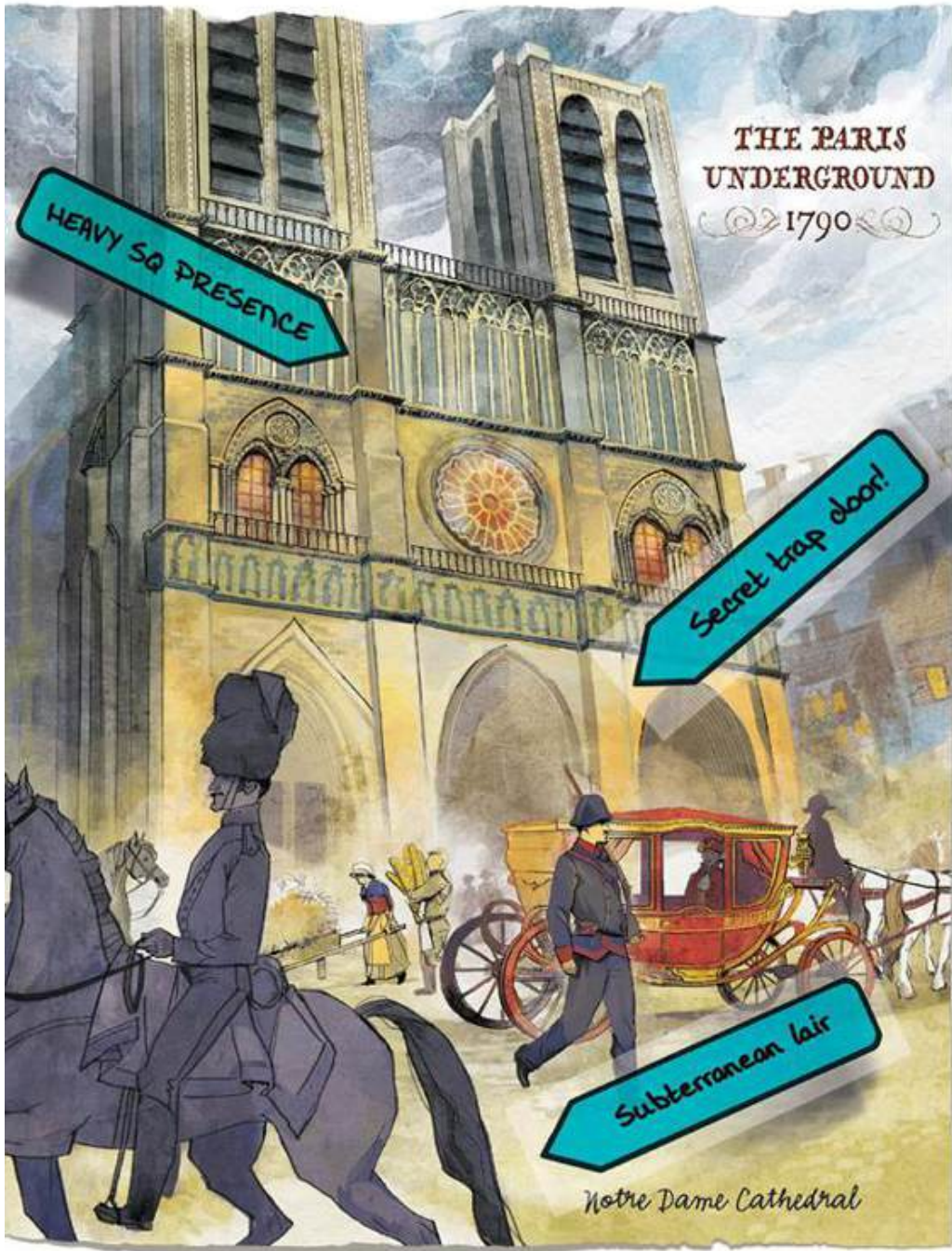
ALL NATURAL

ORANGE  
JUICE

With Extra Vitamins!

I highly advise that you take some VITAMIN C before heading back in time. You definitely don't want to get sick while you're in the past. Why? One typical treatment in 18th century France was bloodletting—which is exactly what it sounds like.

Another cure was to place a dead pigeon on an ache until the stench forced you to remove it. Delightful!



THE PARIS UNDERGROUND  
1790

HEAVY SQ PRESENCE

Secret trap door!

Subterranean lair

Notre Dame Cathedral

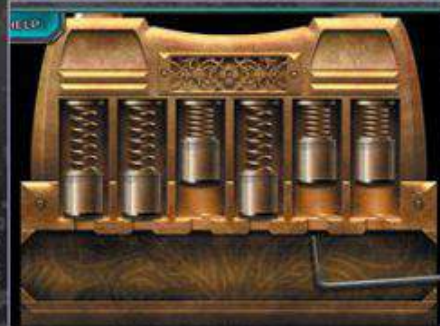


**PLAY THE GAME**

## Infinity Ring • Episode 6 HIDDEN TREASURES



Discover the mysteries of  
Notre Dame!



Break into the SQ  
strongholds!

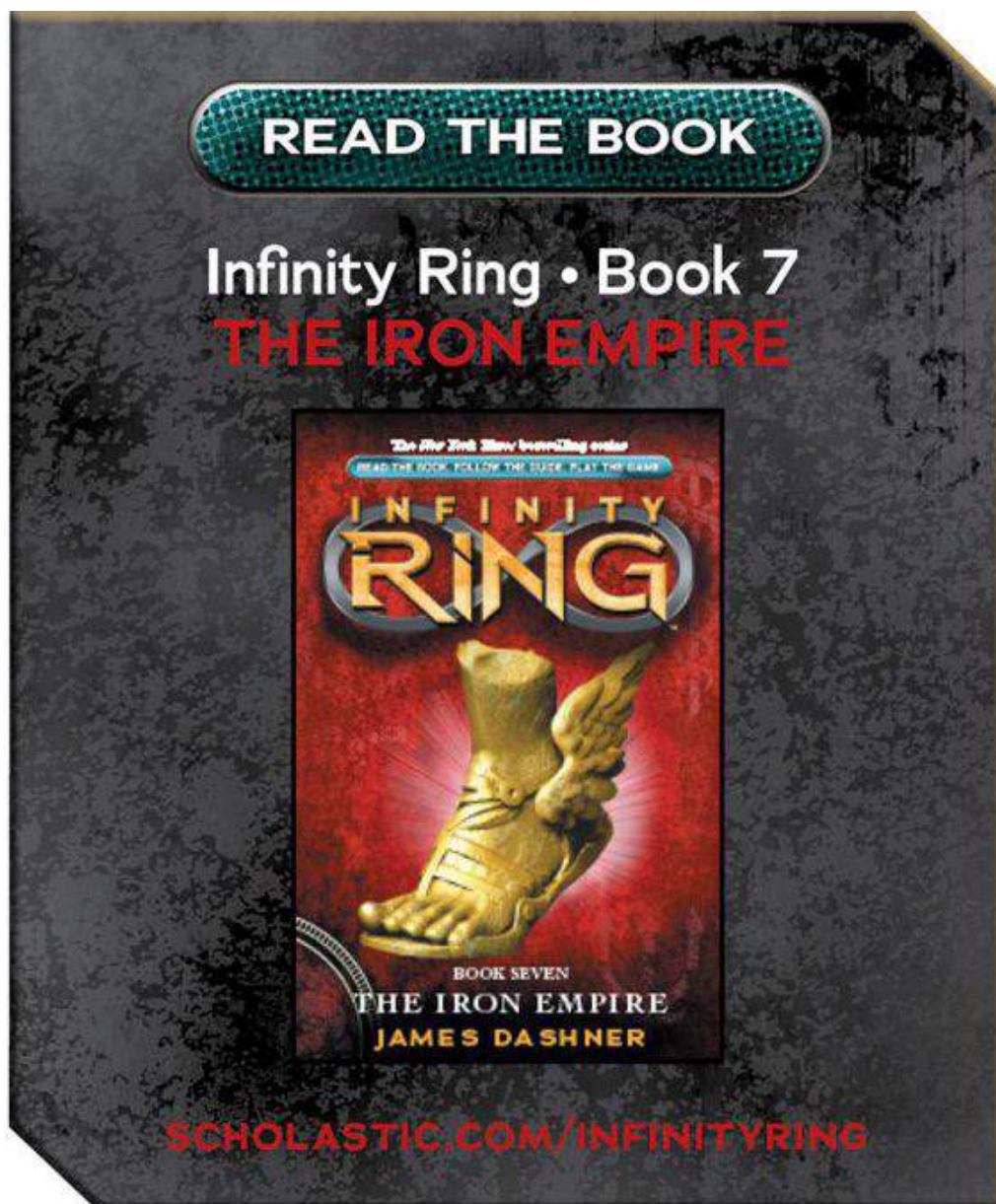
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**At last! Dak, Sera, and Riq travel back to where it all began. But they are not the only time travelers in Ancient Greece. Don't miss history in the breaking!**

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Below is a sneak peek from Infinity Ring Book 7: *The Iron Empire* by James Dashner.

The logo consists of two interlocking circles forming an infinity symbol. The text "The Horse's Eyes" is centered over the symbol.

## The Horse's Eyes

“THIS IS the only thing I’ve ever put my foot down about,” Dak said, folding his arms and trying his all-around best to look like a dude who meant what he said and said what he meant. “We’re already here. No changing your minds.”

He faced his best friend — Sera Froste — and his slowly-but-surely-becoming second best friend, Riq Jones. They stood in a dusty, dry alley behind Ford’s Theatre in Washington, DC. The year was 1865, the day April 15, just a few hours from what Dak now considered the darkest moment in all of history. Because his hero of heroes was about to be shot in the head.

He had read all about it in a history book he’d pilfered from 1945. Dak knew Abraham Lincoln as a congressman and lawyer who had spoken out against slavery — and been silenced by the SQ as a result. But when the time travelers had fixed a Break in 1850, they had, in a roundabout way, ensured that the great man would go on to do great things. Dak read all about them.

And he couldn’t bear the thought of what came next.

“Have you not learned a thing since we started all this?” Riq asked him. The older boy wasn’t being a jerk — even Dak had to admit that the concerns over his plan were pretty valid. But this was Abraham Lincoln. *President* Abraham Lincoln. A once-in-a-lifetime chance lay before them.



Sera had been nodding since the first word popped out of Riq's mouth. "He's right, Dak. You mean a lot to me, and I know this means a lot to you. That's why I let you talk me into coming here. But now . . . we just can't do this. We can't. I'm sorry."

"Yes. We can." It took all of Dak's effort to stay still. Resolute. He wanted to save President Lincoln and that was that.

"And risk everything?" Sera countered. "Throw everything off balance? Create a new Great Break?"

Dak boiled inside. "How can stopping the murder of our greatest president be a Break? It'll only help the world get better!"

"It's not about what events are good or bad," Riq said, "and you know it. It's about a pattern, and that pattern being broken. Making reality unstable. The Hystorians didn't say that Lincoln dying was a Break, therefore him *not* dying might very well *be* a Break."

"It could unravel everything," Sera added.

Dak sighed. They'd just saved the Louvre in France from being sabotaged by Marie Antoinette. Surely Abraham Lincoln was just as important as a dusty old museum?

"So, it's two against one?" he asked timidly, all his bravado gone. He heard horses clomping out on the main street, and it made him picture the president coming along in his own carriage soon.

"Two against one," Sera agreed. "Good thing we're an odd number so we can't get tied up on decisions. Right?"

"Right," Dak repeated. Then he turned and ran, sprinting down a connecting alley toward the sounds of the horses. Forget democracy this time. He'd talk to Lincoln if it was the last thing he ever did.

Sera shouted his name from behind, and the sound of their footsteps followed. Dak knew he couldn't outrun them, so he had to get a little reckless. He burst out into the main street, where throngs of people and horses and carriages and carts were all in motion. Shouts and curses rang out as he bumped and jostled his way across the road, almost getting

clomped by a big black horse whose eyes seemed to say, “Hey, idiot, quit messing with history.”

Dak swung around the other side of the horse and rider, and scooted his way down the wooden sidewalk, running past shops and tanneries, a post office. He saw a break in the crowd and sprinted back across the street, toward the entrance of Ford’s Theatre, where the nasty deed was going to go down in a few hours. He went for the door, hoping it was open, not caring who was behind it. No one played hide-and-seek like Dak “the Ghost” Smyth.

The door opened beautifully.

One minute later, Dak was nestled behind a curtain in the back of the theater, sucking in breaths like a hungry hippo.



After an hour of searching, Sera gave up.

“What a goon,” Riq said, leaning back against the wooden siding of a cooper’s shop. “It annoys the heck out of me that I’ve actually started to like that doofus.”

“No one says *doofus* anymore,” Sera answered absently.

“In 1865? Actually, they haven’t *started* saying it yet. Not until around 1960.” Riq smiled. “But it’s a good word. We should say *doofus* more often. Especially when talking about Dak.”

Sera sighed, almost felt tears emerge. *Come on, Dak*, she thought. *Please, please don’t mess everything up.*

A beautiful two-horse carriage made its way down the street toward them, and people along the wooden walkways on both sides of the street were pointing and gawking, whispering to one another furiously. Sera knew who was inside even before the horses stopped right in front of the entrance to Ford’s Theatre.

Despite everything, she stared in wonder as the man Dak had described so reverently — beard, top hat, lankiness, and all — stepped

out of the carriage. Abraham Lincoln had arrived.

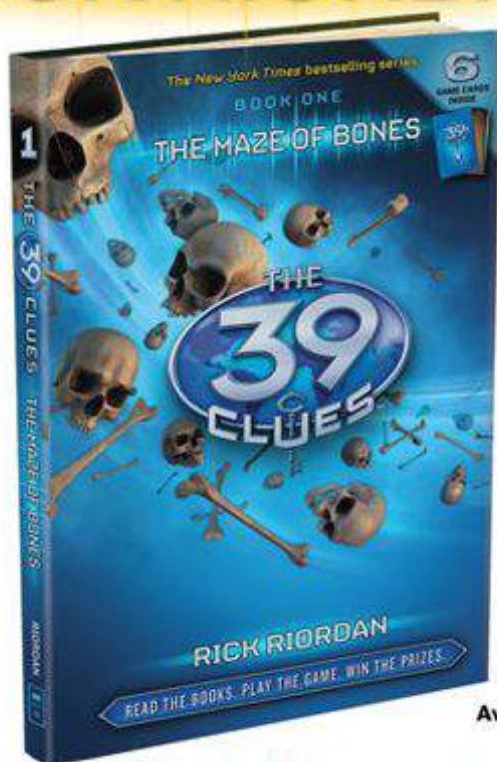
# JENNIFER A. NIELSEN



**Jennifer A. Nielsen** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The False Prince* and its sequel, *The Runaway King*, as well as the popular Underworld Chronicles series. She loves chocolate, old books, and lazy days in the mountains. Born and raised in northern Utah, she lives there today with her husband, three children, and a dog that won't play fetch.



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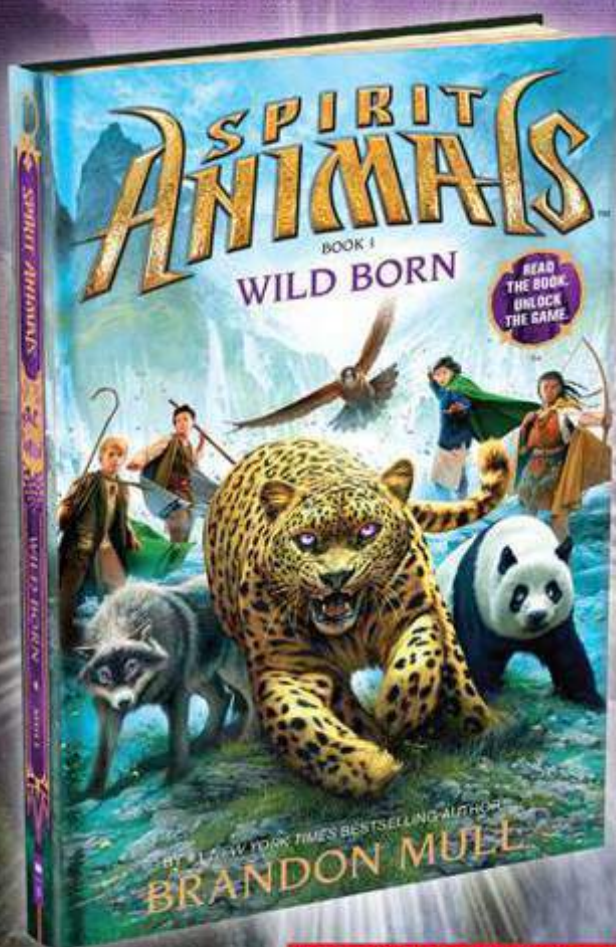
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From the creators of The 39 Clues™ and Infinity Ring™

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First published in the US by Scholastic Inc, 2013  
First published in the UK by Scholastic Ltd, 2013  
This electronic edition published in the UK by Scholastic Ltd, 2013

Copyright © 2013 Scholastic Inc  
Cover illustration by Michael Heath  
Cover design was by Keirsten Geise  
Map by Jim McMahon

eISBN 978 1407 13602 8

A CIP catalogue record for this work is available from the British Library.

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Produced in India by Quadrum

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## The Iron Empire

James Dashner

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— J.D.





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## PROLOGUE

ARISTOTLE STUDIED the black and white stones on the checkered *Petteia* board, wondering if it was a bad idea to beat Plato three times in a row. The man might be the greatest philosopher of all time, but he sure got cranky when he lost at games. And a grumpy Plato was never a good thing.

Trying his best to show a look of deep concentration, Aristotle moved a black stone to a square that opened up an opportunity for his teacher to trap him several turns later.

“Going to let me win, are you?” Plato asked, a stern look of disapproval crinkling his ancient face, half-hidden by a ringlet-filled beard. He leaned back in his chair, stroking that grand bushel of hair hanging from his chin. “Perhaps it’s time for the teacher to become the student, and the student the teacher, when the student must teach the teacher what the teacher ought teach the student.”

Aristotle stared at his master, fighting to keep emotion from his face — fighting the smile that tried to force its way past the whiskers of his own beard. Plato sounded like a philosopher even when he complained about a board game. Several seconds later, after what seemed like a much longer battle of locking eyes, the two men burst into a fit of laughter that would shock anyone else at the stoic Academy of Plato in Athens, Greece. But after



twenty years, they had become much more than a pupil and his instructor. They were friends for life.

“I thought I’d at least give you a chance today,” Aristotle said. “A win for you might save a pupil or three from being sent to the kitchens to scrub pots.”

“Ah,” Plato responded, “but it’s there that you make your mistake in the line of logic, my dear student. You should have foreseen that I would spot your plan, which stabs my pride even more than a loss, thereby making for an irascible teacher indeed. You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.”

Aristotle frowned, slightly hurt. “Are you saying that you think less of me, master?”

“Of course not.” Plato stood, smoothing out the wrinkles in his tunic. “I’m only reminding you to be wary when you make decisions against an opponent in *Petteia*. Wars have turned on less important matters. Come, let us drink wine and observe the setting of the sun.”

“What about . . . ?” Aristotle eyed the board.

“You’ve tainted the challenge,” Plato said. “And learned your lesson. Now, come.”

They made their way to a balcony on the west side of the Academy, its view a breathtaking glimpse of Athens and the sea beyond. The sinking sun painted a splash of orange across the thin clouds in the sky, and a salt-tinged breeze washed across Aristotle. He closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the taste of life, then sat with his teacher, facing the waning day.

“I want to hear your thoughts on the future,” Plato said as he took a sip of diluted wine. “We spend so much time in these halls and courtyards speaking of the past, analyzing the present. But lately my mind has been heavy with contemplating that which has yet to come. The world is experiencing an explosion of knowledge and growth, but what path does it follow? Is the destination one to be desired?”

Aristotle took his own long gulp of the sweet wine. This seemed a deep subject, even for his teacher, the *master* of deep subjects — it would be long into the night before this conversation ended.

“Have I stumped you?” Plato prodded.

“No, teacher. I’m only pausing to gather my thoughts before I say something foolish. It is the mark of an educated man to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

“Wise words,” Plato responded. “Which is why in my company you can speak as you think, because I will never hold you to your musings. We are here to philosophize, and by accident we may change the very future of which we ponder. Or, likewise, we may spew forth nonsense and go to bed frustrated at the effort. As my teacher, Socrates, said before, ‘I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing.’”

Plato grew silent, and Aristotle knew that the man now expected his student to start spilling his thoughts. Which he did, finally feeling free to share the peculiar musings he’d pondered many times in the quiet of his room.

“I often wonder if the world is part of a fabric, master. Metaphorically, of course. We do, after all, imagine the Fates as great weavers. Perhaps time is woven in a pattern, then, and there are threads of events *placed* in that pattern in some predetermined sequence. And if there is a design to the reality of the universe, does it follow that it’s possible for that reality to be . . . broken? For things to go the way they should not?”

Plato had turned in his chair to look at his pupil, a sense of wonder in his eyes. “Please, do go on. You’ve captured my attention.”

Aristotle knew his teacher was sincere, and he continued with excitement.

“As I study the tomes of our history, a recurring thought always comes to my mind — what if something happened that wasn’t supposed to happen? Or what if something *didn’t* happen that should have? Is it permanent? Is history permanent? Or can we . . . change it?”

“Change history?” Plato asked. “So much said in so few words. I think you’ve breasted a topic that in truth frightens me, my pupil. Not in a bad way, mind you. But my foundation trembles.”

“No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness,” Aristotle said. “And I do believe that the things I’ve pondered about our past and future

walk the edge of that madness. But by the same token, it may be the most important notion I've ever had."

Plato nodded slowly, considering. "What is at the crux of this . . . notion?"

"Progress," Aristotle replied. "Technology. On a scale that is beyond even the furthest reaches of our understanding. What if some day our race advances enough that we could actually manipulate time and —"

A rapid flurry of knocks at the door interrupted his words. Plato, his beard seeming a shade darker somehow, reluctantly ordered whomever it was to step onto the balcony. A young boy — his name was Python of Aenus — popped his head in and apologized.

"I'm sorry, master," Python said. "But there is a message from King Philip, sent by horse. I thought you would want to see it."

Plato sighed. "What would Socrates say at a time like this?"

"Be kind," Aristotle provided, "for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

"Don't put up airs, pupil." But Plato had the scantest glint of mirth in his eyes — a rarity these days. "Bring it, boy, and then get back to your studies. Tomorrow we will begin the Theory of Forms."

Python quickly handed over the small scroll to his master, then scurried back inside from the balcony, shutting the door behind him. Plato unrolled the parchment and read through its contents, his expression never changing. Aristotle knew better than to pry.

Finally, the scholarch of the Academy of Plato — and its namesake — looked up, eyeing his student. "Looks like our discussion on the madness of the mind and the ability to change history will have to wait until a later time, my friend."

"Oh?" Aristotle hoped it wasn't bad news.

Plato stood, then glanced at the scroll as he spoke. "You've been summoned by Philip to tutor his son Alexander the Third. The future king of Macedonia." Plato looked up once more, a sense of pride behind that beard and those ancient eyes.

Aristotle swallowed, not sure what to think of such a life change. “Alexander the Third? He’s still a boy, still teachable. This might be a wonderful thing.”

“Yes, indeed.” Plato leaned on the railing and watched the dying glow of the sunset. “There are those who say the boy is destined to have . . . *greatness*. It is my sincere hope that you can make sure this is so.”

“Yes, teacher,” Aristotle replied, excited by the prospect. “I will do my best.”



# The Horse's Eyes

“THIS IS the only thing I’ve ever put my foot down about,” Dak said, folding his arms and trying his all-around best to look like a dude who meant what he said and said what he meant. “We’re already here. No changing your minds.”

He faced his best friend — Sera Froste — and his slowly-but-surely-becoming second best friend, Riq Jones. They stood in a dusty, dry alley behind Ford’s Theatre in Washington, DC. The year was 1865, the day April 15, just a few hours from what Dak now considered the darkest moment in all of history. Because his hero of heroes was about to be shot in the head.

He had read all about it in a history book he’d pilfered from 1945. Dak knew Abraham Lincoln as a congressman and lawyer who had spoken out against slavery — and been silenced by the SQ as a result. But when the time travelers had fixed a Break in 1850, they had, in a roundabout way, ensured that the great man would go on to do great things. Dak read all about them.

And he couldn’t bear the thought of what came next.

“Have you not learned a thing since we started all this?” Riq asked him. The older boy wasn’t being a jerk — even Dak had to admit that the concerns over his plan were pretty valid. But this was Abraham Lincoln. *President* Abraham Lincoln. A once-in-a-lifetime chance lay before them.

Sera had been nodding since the first word popped out of Riq’s mouth. “He’s right, Dak. You mean a lot to me, and I know this means a lot to you. That’s why I let you talk me into coming here. But now . . . we just can’t do this. We can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Yes. We can.” It took all of Dak’s effort to stay still. Resolute. He wanted to save President Lincoln and that was that.

“And risk everything?” Sera countered. “Throw everything off balance? Create a new Great Break?”

Dak boiled inside. “How can stopping the murder of our greatest president be a Break? It’ll only help the world get better!”

“It’s not about what events are good or bad,” Riq said, “and you know it. It’s about a pattern, and that pattern being broken. Making reality unstable. The Hystorians didn’t say that Lincoln dying was a Break, therefore him *not* dying might very well *be* a Break.”

“It could unravel everything,” Sera added.

Dak sighed. They’d just saved the Louvre in France from being sabotaged by Marie Antoinette. Surely Abraham Lincoln was just as important as a dusty old museum?

“So, it’s two against one?” he asked timidly, all his bravado gone. He heard horses clomping out on the main street, and it made him picture the president coming along in his own carriage soon.

“Two against one,” Sera agreed. “Good thing we’re an odd number so we can’t get tied up on decisions. Right?”

“Right,” Dak repeated. Then he turned and ran, sprinting down a connecting alley toward the sounds of the horses. Forget democracy this time. He’d talk to Lincoln if it was the last thing he ever did.

Sera shouted his name from behind, and the sound of their footsteps followed. Dak knew he couldn’t outrun them, so he had to get a little reckless.

He burst out into the main street, where throngs of people and horses and carriages and carts were all in motion. Shouts and curses rang out as he bumped and jostled his way across the road, almost getting clomped by a big black horse whose eyes seemed to say, “Hey, idiot, quit messing with history.”

Dak swung around the other side of the horse and rider, and scooted his way down the wooden sidewalk, running past shops and tanneries, a post office. He saw a break in the crowd and sprinted back across the street, toward the entrance of Ford’s Theatre, where the nasty deed was going to go down in a few hours. He went for the door, hoping it was open, not caring who was behind it. No one played hide-and-seek like Dak “the Ghost” Smyth.

The door opened beautifully.

One minute later, Dak was nestled behind a curtain in the back of the theater, sucking in breaths like a hungry hippo.



After an hour of searching, Sera gave up.

“What a goon,” Riq said, leaning back against the wooden siding of a cooper’s shop. “It annoys the heck out of me that I’ve actually started to like that doofus.”

“No one says *doofus* anymore,” Sera answered absently.

“In 1865? Actually, they haven’t *started* saying it yet. Not until around 1960.” Riq smiled. “But it’s a good word. We should say *doofus* more often. Especially when talking about Dak.”

Sera sighed, almost felt tears emerge. *Come on, Dak*, she thought. *Please, please don’t mess everything up.*

A beautiful two-horse carriage made its way down the street toward them, and people along the wooden walkways on both sides of the street were pointing and gawking, whispering to one another furiously. Sera knew who was inside even before the horses stopped right in front of the entrance to Ford’s Theatre.

Despite everything, she stared in wonder as the man Dak had described so reverently — beard, top hat, lankiness, and all — stepped out of the carriage.

Abraham Lincoln had arrived.





## A Visit with Abe

ONCE DAK had known he was safe from Riq and Sera, he'd slowly and stealthily made his way through the rows of seats, out a door, up a flight of stairs, and onto the balcony where he knew President Lincoln and his wife would be seated. They should be there any minute now.

He heard the voice before he saw the man.

Dak had assumed the greatest leader the world had ever known would have a deep, resounding, booming voice, a voice that could be heard across the entire country every time he so much as said "Excuse me." But that wasn't true. Lincoln actually spoke with a somewhat high-pitched, squeaky sound. Dak decided that just made him all the more likable.

"Our seats are right up here, Mary," the man said. "The good people here at Ford's were so nice to arrange this. A great way to celebrate the Confederacy's surrender, don't you think?"

"Why, yes, my dear. So very nice of them." Dak could hardly contain himself. He wanted nothing more at that moment than to give First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln a big hug.

When the couple reached the little alcove, Dak gathered his courage and stepped out from the shadows. When he did, Mary gave out a little shriek and clutched her husband's arm. As for Mr. Lincoln, he grabbed her almost as hard, making a sound that made Dak picture a poor little mouse smashed by a boot. He couldn't really blame them for the reaction, seeing a geeky kid in strange clothes appearing out of nowhere.

Dak held up his hands, palms out. "Hi there. Don't worry, I'm not here to assassinate you or anything. I'm from the future. Mary, you're looking quite dandy tonight." He let out a little peep of a laugh, and then his face reddened like coals as he realized that he'd just said about the dumbest assembly of words ever uttered by a human being.

The president had regained his composure, however, his face a mask of calm. "Son, is there something I can do for you? My wife and I are here to enjoy the show tonight."

"Yeah, about that . . ." Dak began, searching for how to say this. He'd gone over it, over and over, in his mind while he hid, but now it was all a blank. "Look, I only need a minute. I know this sounds crazy-town, but I really am from the future. And I know something that you *need* to know. There's a man named John Wilkes —"

"Stop." Abraham Lincoln only said the one word, but it held so much power that Dak couldn't have spoken again for a million dollars. Then the man came forward and knelt before Dak — quite the feat, long arms and legs folding up like a wooden laundry rack — putting president and boy on the same level. Then Lincoln reached out and took Dak by the shoulders.

"Listen to me, son," he said. "I can tell you're a good soul, and I'm sure that somewhere you have very proud parents. If you say that you're from the future, then I believe you. But if that's true, then there's a lesson I want you to learn. A lesson about destiny. My path has been laid before me. As has yours. Now it's our job to walk it."

"But . . ." Dak started, but the look on Lincoln's face stopped him cold again.

The president smiled. "What's your name?"

“Dak.”

“Dak? Unusual. But I like it.” Lincoln stood up, unfolding himself until he seemed to stand a hundred feet tall. Then, looking down at Dak, he said, “Now, go on and walk your path, Dak. Do good things. Make the world a better place.”

Dak nodded, suddenly knowing, without a doubt, that Sera and Riq had been right all along. He sighed, feeling that too-close-for-comfort feeling. Not for the first time, Abraham Lincoln himself had saved the day.

“Good-bye, Dak,” the president said.

“Bye.” It was all he could get through his emotion-choked throat.

Dak walked away from his hero, his heart aching, six words ringing in his head. Six words that he’d never, never forget.

*Make the world a better place.*



## The Forest Floor

THE SUN had set by the time Dak came out of the theater, his shoulders slumped, a suspicious redness to his eyes. Sera wanted to scream at him, pound him, lecture him until the moon crossed the sky. But instead she walked right up and threw her arms around him, squeezing tight.

“What happened?”

“You were right,” he answered. “Both of you. We need to leave before the president gets shot.”

Sera pulled back in surprise. “You didn’t tell him?”

“Destiny” was his only response.

Sera glanced over at Riq, who shrugged. At least he didn’t say “I told you so,” or look smug. The three of them had come a long way, leaving behind their childish ways. Mostly.

“Let’s just get out of here,” Riq said. “This won’t be the best place to hang around in about an hour. And you both know what’s waiting for us now.”

In answer, Sera reached down to her satchel, where the figure-eight shape of the Infinity Ring rested, hard and cold. Ready to take them to their final destination, where matters would be settled once and for all.

“The Prime Break,” Dak whispered, as if the words were sacred.

The three of them found an alley and walked into the safety of the darkness.



Traveling through the wormholes of time was an experience that Sera would both miss and hope to never do again. She loved it in a way — doing something so scientifically revolutionary, so spectacular, so terrifying. But she also hated it. Every time her body ripped through the dazzling violence of a quantum disturbance, it was as if a part of it got left behind. Time ate away at her like it ate away the years.

Nineteenth-century Washington, DC, exploded away from them, replaced by sound and sparks and streaking light and warping pain. Like always, just when Sera thought she couldn't take one more second of it, they were thrown from the wormhole, spilling out and tumbling across the soft leaves of a forest floor near Corinth, Greece. Sera's head whacked the trunk of a tree right at the end of her roll, a perfect ending.

Dak must've seen it because he was at her side in a flash.

“You okay?” he asked.

She looked up at him. “Yeah, fine. Thanks for asking.” And she really meant it. Maybe Dak meeting Abraham Lincoln had been worth the extra trip after all. Suddenly he seemed . . . nicer. Wiser.

Riq was sitting nearby, arms draped across his knees. “When you get back to the future and everything is hunky-dory and the Cataclysm is nothing but a nice Remnant, I have a feeling you two are going to get married.”

Dak and Sera looked at each other, eyes widening by the nanosecond, then they both exploded in a fit of laughter.

“Not quite the reaction I expected,” the older boy said.

Sera got control of herself, but lost it when she made the mistake of meeting eyes with Dak again. After another round of the snickers, they finally stopped.

Riq shook his head. “The amount of laughing just now was nowhere near proportional to the humor level. You guys are weird.”

Dak stood up, then helped Sera do the same, just like a gentleman and his lady.

“Riq, you’ve got a lot to learn about life,” Dak said.

“Yep,” Sera added.

His baffled look made him more likable somehow. He stood to join them just as Sera slipped the Infinity Ring back into her satchel.

“So, what’s our mission?” Dak asked, bringing their duties back to the forefront. Suddenly, Sera couldn’t bring herself to smile and found it hard to believe she’d been hooting like a tickled six-year-old seconds earlier.

“The Prime Break,” Riq answered. “Plain and simple as that. We need to stop Alexander the Third from being assassinated. Sorry we couldn’t do the same for Abraham Lincoln.”

Dak looked at him sharply, as if he assumed the boy was mocking him, but the expression quickly softened. Riq had been genuine in respecting Dak’s all-out hero worship.

“It’s a weird mission, you know?” Sera said.

“What do you mean?” Dak asked.

“It’s 336 BC. We’re in Greece. And we have a mission. But things are so different now. There *are* no Hystorians here. Or SQ for that matter. No Time Wardens. Aristotle doesn’t even know about the society that *he* created yet. Or, I guess, creates. It’s just strange to think about.”

Dak’s eyes lit up like something had just clicked in his brain. “If we end up fixing all the Breaks, then Aristotle doesn’t even *need* to create the Hystorians, right? So how will our future selves know to come back and . . .”

He trailed off, and Sera knew why. “Pointless to talk about,” she said. “It’s the old go-back-and-kill-your-own-grandma argument. Somehow, it just

doesn't work that way. Time lines, the river, boulders in the stream, all that. Let's just focus on getting the job done. And trusting the Hystorians."

"First things first," Riq said. "Dak, you're the history dork." He said the words the same way he'd compliment a nicely cooked steak. "Give us the scoop on what *did* happen to Alexander, and then we can figure out how to change things."

Dak looked like a kid who'd just been given an eternal hall pass at school. "Well, Riq, I'm a little rusty on the subject, but —"

"Oh, please," Sera inserted. "You know every little fact and figure. Spill it."

"Your wish is my command, my lady." Dak straightened and looked off somewhere in the distance, as if he were recalling an actual memory. "A man named Attalas was behind the murder of King Philip and Alexander. Attalas wanted his grandson, Karanos, to be the next king of Macedonia, and Alexander stood right smack in the way of that. The man who actually did the deed was named Pausanius, a nobleman who'd become a close bodyguard of King Philip. Pausanius poisoned both Philip and Alexander while they were in camp with the army, preparing to march against Asia Minor. Philip wanted to conquer the whole Persian Empire eventually."

Sera felt her eyes starting to cross as her friend spoke. All she heard was a bunch of names and the drone of Dak's teaching voice. Even after all she'd experienced, history just wasn't her thing.

"It should be pretty simple," Dak continued. "If I remember correctly" — Sera almost groaned at that; of *course* he remembered correctly — "Alexander had made a surprise visit to see his dad that day — Alex was actually living with his mom somewhere else. She'd kinda been exiled, but that's a whole 'nother story. Anyway, all we have to do is make sure our boy Alex doesn't make that trip. Then he won't be killed. This might be our easiest Break yet!"

"Don't say that, you goofball," Riq said. "You'll jinx us."

Sera sighed, knowing without a doubt that the odds of things being easy were on par with the odds of Dak going on a no-cheese diet. "So when and

where does the murder happen?”

“Three weeks from now,” Dak answered, “way up near the northern border of Greece. Just a few hundred miles, NBD.”

“NBD?” Riq repeated.

“No big deal.”

“Wait a minute,” Sera said. “Why are we *that* early, and so far away? Why did the Hystorians have us come to Corinth?”

Dak’s face split into an all-too-familiar grin. “I think I know exactly why. Because there’s no way we can do this before talking to The Man himself.” He paused for a dramatic effect that certainly wasn’t needed. “Let’s go find Aristotle.”





## A Doozy

“YOU KNOW,” Sera said, “I’ve spent most of my life thinking I’d never hear the phrase ‘Let’s go find Aristotle.’”

Dak was beaming on the inside, and probably on the outside, too. Ever since he’d first learned that Aristotle had been the one to start the Hystorians, he’d been waiting to say those exact words.

“Well, it’s our lucky day, isn’t it?” he said, then he pulled the SQuare from his pants — he loved keeping it there for the sole reason that Sera made a disgusted face every time she had to touch it. “Now, let’s just check in with what our good friend Arin left us on here, if anything. Maybe she knew an exact time and place to find the dude.”

“‘The dude’?” Sera asked. “That’s what we’re calling one of the greatest philosophers of all time, now? The dude?”

Dak was fiddling with the SQuare and barely heard her. After he had logged in, a block of text popped up, with a complicated Art of Memory pictogram right below it. *Of course*, Dak thought. Of all the people they’d dealt with, Aristotle would be the one most likely to pass down a cryptic clue

concerning the very Break that started it all. He was the source of the mnemonic learning system in the first place.

Dak showed the screen to his friends.

“Oh, boy,” Riq said. “That one looks like a doozy.”

“Exactly,” Dak responded. “Which is why I’m going to take the first crack at it.”

Sera reached out and ripped the SQuare from Dak’s hands. “Silly boys. How about we all do this together?” She sat down on the forest floor and held the device out on her lap for all to see.

Dak crouched over her shoulder and peered down at the glowing screen. “Should I read the poem out loud?”

“Go for it.”

A tale I’ll tell to all the world,  
A tale not true to them unfurl.  
To hide the truth, to lead astray,  
Those who want the Breaks to stay.  
The murders both are vicious, cruel,  
An end unworthy, for wise nor fool.  
The one who hides behind the deed,  
Is one of evil, spiteful creed.  
Search the clue to you I give.  
Sift it, as sand through a sieve.  
Find the traitor, find the one,  
Who’d have our pattern ripped, undone.

After Dak read it, he scanned through the words again, hoping that something would pop out at him. But it really just seemed like a prelude to the pictogram below it. That’s what they needed to solve

“ ‘A tale not true’? So it wasn’t . . . what was his name?” Sera asked, looking over her shoulder at Dak.

“Attalas,” Dak answered. “Looks like someone *else* was behind the murders.”

Riq was kneeling next to Sera, intently studying the screen. “Maybe it’ll be obvious once we figure out the clue he left.”

“Looks hard,” Dak said, half to himself.

Riq nodded. “Like I said. A doozy.”



After several minutes of studying the pictogram, Sera finally clicked off the power to the Square. “My eyeballs are starting to hurt. Let’s take a break and let it simmer in our heads.”

“I recognize the images,” Dak said. “That’s Herakles and Perseus. But they’re mythological figures, not historical people. They obviously didn’t kill

anybody. So what does it mean?"

"I just thought of something," Riq said. "Aristotle *wrote* this clue, right? And Dak thinks the first thing we need to do is meet the old man. So why even bother with trying to solve this. Let's just go ask the source!"

Dak's first instinct was to take an opportunity to point out just how dumb Riq was. But he didn't have the heart for it. After all, for a split second, Dak had actually thought the same thing.

"He won't know any more than we do," he said. "He won't know anything about the murders or who was behind them until it's already happened. That's the whole point of why we're here."

Riq shrugged. "Yeah, but still . . . Once we explain who we are, why we're here, and all that, we can show him what he created. Call me crazy, but I bet he'd be better at figuring out his own clue than we would be."

"But," Dak countered, holding up a finger, "imagine how impressed he'd be if we solved it first."

"I think showing up with a time-travel device will be plenty impressive," Riq replied. "But feel free to tell us the answer anytime you want. Maybe the Greek gods will help you out if you start praying to them."

Sera had gotten to her feet, wiping leaves and dirt from her pants. She handed the SQuare to Dak, who slipped it back in his secret pocket. He knew he must look dazed now, because the wheels had really started spinning in his mind.

"Dak?" Sera asked. "You okay, there, buddy? You look like you're gonna puke."

"No," he replied absently. "I mean, yes. I'm okay." He shook his head back and forth as if doing so would put all the pieces into place. Something Riq had said had triggered a disturbing line of thought.

"Dak?" Sera asked again. "What's going on? Seriously?"

He looked at her, then at Riq, then back to her again.

"I know who did it," he said. "I know who the clue reveals — who was behind the murders."

"That was fast," Riq said.

Sera just raised her eyebrows, waiting for the answer.

Dak felt sick even saying it. “His mom did it. Alexander the Third’s mom arranged to have them killed.”



## Son of a God

SERA STARED at her best friend, having a hard time believing what he'd just said. A soft breeze had picked up in the forest, bringing with it the smells of olives and pine. The day had gotten brighter, too, starting to get a little warm.

“What . . . where . . . how did you come up with that?” she asked Dak. “Plus, what kind of mother arranges for her son to be killed?”

The look on his face reminded her of a dam about to burst, trying to hold back too much. “Not many people know about Alexander’s mom. Her name was Olympias, and after a few good years with King Philip, they . . . went their separate ways. Which is a nice way of saying that he fell in love with Cleopatra and gave Olympias the boot. He exiled her. She and the kid were sent off to the countryside.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Riq said, rubbing his temples. “I might not be the historical genius you are — something you like to remind us about fifty times a day — but I know very well that Philip didn’t marry the most famous woman in Egyptian history.”

Dak sighed. “Not *that* Cleopatra. She won’t be born for another few centuries. This is a Greek woman. Cleopatra Eurydice.”

Riq nodded. “Oh. Yeah. Well, see? Maybe I’m good at history after all!”

“Congrats,” Dak muttered, then turned his attention back to Sera as if she were the only one intelligent enough to continue the conversation. “Anyway, so her name is Olympias. What does that name make you think of?”

“Greek gods and such,” Sera answered.

“Exactly. And she only had one son. And he’s the son of a king. Slightly important to her. So guess what she always called him? Her . . . nickname for him, I guess.”

Sera pictured the Art of Memory clue left by Aristotle, and then it clicked. She knew what Herakles and Perseus had in common — a father.

“You can’t be serious.”

Dak smiled. “Oh, I can be serious. She called the kid Son of Zeus.”

“Wait,” Riq put in. “You mean she called him Zeus?”

“No, she called him *Son of Zeus*. As in ‘Hey, Son of Zeus, time to get your jammies on!’ Or ‘Hey, Son of Zeus, it’s your turn to do the dishes!’ ‘Hey, Son of Zeus, could ya pipe down up there, I’m trying to take a nap!’ *Son of Zeus*.”

Riq shook his head. “Talk about spoiling your kid. I bet he had a ton of friends at the schoolyard when his mom came by to pick up the Son of Zeus every day.”

Sera had been leaning against a tree, but she straightened and held her hands up in a gesture that said she wasn’t quite connecting the dots. “The fact she treated him like some mythological hero only makes it more strange that she’d arrange to have him *murdered*. Right? Are we sure about this?”

“I don’t know,” Riq said. “Maybe it has something to do with all that Greek mythology. Those gods were all family, and they were constantly trying to kill one another.”

“We just need to find Aristotle,” Dak said, pointing off in a direction as if he knew exactly where they should go. “He’ll be at the League of Corinth, so I’m sure we’ll be able to find him with a little snooping around. I got a plaster

bust of him for my kindergarten graduation, so I should be able to recognize his face when I see him.”

Sera tried to hold in the laugh, but it came out anyway, sounding like a burp mixed with a cough.

“What?” Dak said, his expression showing genuine offense. “It looked great next to the statue of Michelangelo’s *David* that I got for my preschool graduation. Duh.”

And with that, Sera started walking in the direction her friend had indicated a few seconds earlier. She didn’t care where it led.



Dak breathed in the salty air, enjoying the warm breeze as they exited the forest and walked out onto a bluff that overlooked the city of Corinth. He felt a little burst of pride at seeing the grand buildings of classic Greek design, knowing that it was in this very place that one of the best examples of early democratic government had existed. The famous League of Corinth boasted representatives from every city-state in the Macedonian Empire except Sparta, which had its own agenda.

Aristotle had been a key figure in organizing the League, which for many years ceased the infighting of the Greek states and helped lay the foundation for a force strong enough to counter the Persian Empire. That was, until their two best hopes at leading were murdered by a man named Pausanias.

“Uh, Dak?” Riq said, nudging his shoulder. “Looks like you checked out there for a sec, buddy.”

Dak realized he was staring, almost cross-eyed, at the fresco of famous Greek gods adorning one of the larger buildings. At Zeus himself. Son of Zeus . . . Could Olympias really have been behind the murders? It seemed crazy. He could barely keep straight all the things swirling in his head.

“Earth to Dak; come *innnnn*, Dak,” Sera said, stepping right in front of him.

He snapped to his senses. “Sorry. It’s just amazing, sometimes, you know. Looking down on actual history.” This brought a pang of sadness. “And I still



can't bear the thought that everything is changing, getting all jumbled up by what we're doing. I tell myself I'll have the rest of my life to study it, kinda like reading a brand-new book with the same characters. I'll just . . . miss the old book. Make sense? Or do I sound like one of Riq's doofuseseseses?"

"No comment," Sera said with a very knowing grin. "It makes perfect sense. It does, trust me. We all feel different weird stuff when it comes to this Hystorian business, but that binds us. We're all weirdos together."

"And that's the sweetest thing anyone has ever said," Riq added. "Come on: group hug."

Dak knew it was weird. Awkward. Maybe the dumbest thing they'd done yet. But he, Sera, and Riq embraced one another in a tangle of arms and shoulders, and squeezed, crushing the breath out of their lungs. A group hug for the ages, right on top of the city of Corinth, Greece.

And it felt good.



## The Hegemon

THE HUG had helped Sera feel better.

As they picked their way down the sandy bluff, using weeds as handholds, she kept thinking how close they were. They didn't have to do something so grand and amazing as prevent a mutiny or stop an entire war. This mission might be as easy as warning King Philip or Alexander the Third, making sure they were on their guard. All they had to do was prevent an assassination.

Her instinct tried to tell her it couldn't possibly be that easy, but she held on to hope.

They reached the bottom of the slope and quickly made their way to the outskirts of the town, where some dwellings had laundry out to dry. It was a trick they'd become very accustomed to: good old-fashioned thievery.

"We should really be thankful the electric dryer wasn't invented until 1938," Dak whispered as he pulled on something that looked like a cross between a robe and a toga. He chuckled, that sound that always served as a warning to those who knew him well. "His name was J. Ross Moore, bless

him. He hailed from North Dakota and had obviously gotten sick of hanging his undies on a wire. His prototype —”

“Dak.” Sera eyed him, then gestured at the dwellings, reminding her friend that they were standing on other people’s property, *stealing* their property, and could be spotted at any second. “Not the best time.”

He nodded, not bothering to hide his disappointment. “Remind me to tell you later, then.”

“Oh, we will,” Riq replied. “No doubt. Soon as possible.”

“You see any sandals anywhere?” Dak asked, obviously choosing to ignore the older boy’s sarcasm. “Sneakers will not go over well in 336 BC.”

“Let’s just wear what we’ve got until we find something better,” Sera offered. “These . . . clothes” — she gestured down at the loose-flowing material of the robe she’d pulled over her head — “should mostly hide them anyway. Man, the way these things drag on the ground, I’d hate to do laundry in this place. Dryer or no dryer.”

Riq huffed. “Let’s just get out of here before some crazy Greek-warrior-ninja comes out and chops our heads off with a scimitar.”

Dak shook his head. “I’ll pretend like I didn’t hear that. It was maybe the most historically inaccurate sentence in . . . history. Come on, follow me.”

“You know where to go?” Sera asked.

“I spotted the statue of the hegemon from the top of the bluff,” Dak answered, already on the move away from the humble dwellings. “That’s as good a place to start as any.”



“What the heck is a hegemon anyway?” Sera asked when they reached the main street of Corinth, a bustle of markets and shops and people everywhere. It reminded Riq a bit of Baghdad except that the architecture was so different — all stone columns and frescoes. “Is it some kind of mythical beast? Lots of arms?”

Dak stopped and turned to look at her. “Lots of . . . what are you talking about? *Hegemon* is another word for king. Right now it’s Philip. He’s the

hegemon of the League of Corinth. All the city-states of Greece and Macedonia send representatives here to work through their issues. You know, all that political stuff. It's basically a republic, and it keeps them all from fighting one another all the time."

"Most republics don't have a king," Riq countered. "Or a hegemon."

Dak shrugged. "Well, it was a good start after years of civil war. I won't bore you with any more details." He paused. "Unless you want me to."

Riq had to restrain the look of horror that wanted to pop on his face. "Uh, I think you know the answer to that one. Maybe later."

"Yeah. If you're lucky. Some seriously fascinating stuff."

"I bet." Riq smiled when Dak turned around and started maneuvering his way through the crowds of Corinth. The kid was a weirdo, but had really become likable. Almost to Riq's chagrin. It had been kind of fun when all they did was fight. He looked at Sera, who knowingly winked at him.

They turned off of the busier part of the street and entered a square with fountains and pigeons everywhere. Things were a little more relaxed here — people strolling about, lovers whispering into each other's ears, friends eating lunch on stone benches. At the far end of the square, a huge statue of a man on a warhorse towered over the people. The man had a laurel crown on his head and a spear in his fist. Beyond the statue was a majestic building with fluted pillars — it was the tallest structure that Riq had seen so far.

"The hegemon," Dak whispered reverently. "And the League of Corinth. This is amazing. If you would've told me when I was seven years old that I'd be standing here someday . . ."

Riq just shook his head. Sera rolled her eyes.

"Some reason you three are here?"

Riq spun around, startled at hearing plain English in such a place. A person stood there — he couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman because he or she was swathed in a loose robe with a deep hood pulled so far forward it obscured the face. And the voice had been muffled.

"Wait," Dak said, tapping Riq on the arm, "was that the translator kicking in?"

“No,” Riq answered, alarm bells ringing inside his mind. “That was perfect English, something that no one from here . . . from this time . . . would speak.”

“Who are you?” Sera asked, attempting, rather poorly, to throw some threat in her voice.

The person didn’t answer, just stared at them through the darkness within the folds of his or her hood.

“Who *are* you?” Sera repeated. This time she did a pretty good job of sounding tough.

Still, the person said nothing. Then, after a few seconds, the stranger lifted the hood and pulled it back, revealing a man with a bald head. Riq took in a quick breath — scars covered the man’s face, and one of his eyes was deeply bloodshot, as if every vessel had burst and never healed. The guy was about three doors down from death.

“I’d say I’m a Time Warden,” the stranger said, “but you three know that’s not true. There’s nobody fitting that description at this point in time, now is there?”

“But you could be from the future,” Dak said. “If we can do it —”

Sera whacked Dak on the arm, right before Riq did the same. The last thing they needed to do was reveal information to the menacing weirdo.

“Ow,” Dak responded sarcastically.

“For the last time,” Sera said, “who are you? And what do you want with us?”

“Who I am is none of your concern,” the man growled, as if he were an actor in a bad local theater. He pulled out a long, sharp, gleaming knife.

“Cause you’re all about to be dead, and I’d just as soon my name not spill from your lips when you meet the devil.”



## One Punch

INSTEAD OF a rush of fear, Dak only felt impatience. He'd gotten used to bad guys threatening them, and right that second the only thing in the world he wanted to do was find Aristotle. This bald buffoon standing in front of him threatened to delay that meeting, and Dak wasn't going to let that happen.

"Sir," he said, "I know you're holding a knife and all, and we look pretty helpless — at least my companions do anyway — but I'm just going to give you one word of warning. We've been through a lot of junk, and we're the last people on earth you want to mess with. So stand aside or pay the consequences. Your choice."

Sera gave him a look, and Dak wasn't quite sure what it meant. Something between amazement and embarrassment. He figured both applied at the moment. A crowd had gathered around them, and the bald man of scars lowered himself into a crouch, the tip of his blade pointed directly at Dak.

"Tough words for a little man," the stranger said, once again in that growl that sounded about as authentic as Riq trying to explain the qualities of a particularly gourmet cheese. "Now just watch as I —"

Dak would never find out what the next word to come out of the man's mouth was going to be. Before he could spit it out, Sera had punched the man in the face. Once, hard, a stroke quick as lightning with her fist all balled up like a coiled snake.

The man grunted, then stumbled back, flailing to catch his balance. He regained it a split second before running into the lip of the fountain — then fell backward and made an impressive splash in the churning waters. The people in the crowd around them burst into laughter and applause, just as two men in tunics and armor moved in to take the bald menace away.

Sera held up her hand, wincing with the pain of the punch. “Let's go find that Aristotle guy,” she said.

Dak had never been prouder.



Riq couldn't wipe the smile off of his own face, and he hoped he didn't look too goofy as he and his friends quickly made their escape from the fountain encounter with the scary-looking man who seemed to come from nowhere. Sera had shown plenty of grit over the course of their adventures, but punching a man twice her size — that quickly and that fiercely — had taken the cake.

When they felt as if they were far enough away to avoid any further suspicion or questioning, the three of them stopped to regroup. Riq just looked at Sera in awe, but of course Dak let his thoughts spill out a mile a minute.

“That was awesome!” he yelled, dancing back and forth on his feet like a boxer, throwing out fake punches. “I mean, I knew you had it in you, and I wasn't surprised at all, but still . . . So cool! I was about to take care of the poor sap myself, but just as well that you did it!”

Sera gave him an amused look and simply said, “Thanks.”

They stood under a tree that was part of a long line bordering the front stairs of what Dak had indicated was the headquarters of the League of Corinth. How someone could know history well enough to figure that out so

easily was beyond Riq — but then again, people were baffled beyond measure when they realized he could speak over two dozen languages. Even when he showed off a bit, most listeners still didn't believe — they just assumed he was putting them on with gibberish.

“How much do we need to worry about that dude?” Dak asked. “You don't think he's SQ, do you? Did Tilda get some of her people back to this time somehow? With her Eternity Ring?”

“Seems pretty darn likely to me,” Riq responded. “There's no way that guy was a local, and he said the words *Time Warden*.”

“Who knows what Tilda is up to?” Sera murmured. Any look of satisfaction she'd gotten from punching the bald guy's lights out had long since faded into grim worry. “We just have to hope we're one step ahead of them. Aristotle was close to Alexander and his dad, so we have an in that she should never be able to get. Let's just find him and make sure we keep this . . . Pausanius from getting anywhere near his target.”

“Excellent plan,” Dak said. He and Sera both then eyed Riq to see if he approved.

“After you,” he said with an ornate, sweeping bow, stepping aside so the other two could lead the way.

Up the stairs they went.



Things were a little different back in the old days.

Sera half-expected the front entrance to have metal detectors and beefy men and women with guns strapped on their belts to watch for strangers up to no good. Not so, of course. Nothing like it — not even an ancient Greek version. Instead they found an open, breezy atrium without a soul in sight save for a man who had to be a hundred years old if he was ten. He sat at a wooden desk, staring at the huge front doors but not seeing anything. He didn't blink or budge a muscle when Sera and the others walked in.

Dak started to approach the guy, but Sera quickly reached out and grabbed his arm. “Are you sure we want to bother him?” she asked. “Better to ask for



forgiveness than permission sometimes. Let's just go find Aristotle."

Dak shook his head. "Your lack of Greek political etiquette is embarrassing. Just give me a sec with the old dude, and we'll save ourselves hours of wandering around like dweebs."

"Fine," Sera replied.

"Careful," Riq butt in. "He might keel over dead if you get him too excited."

Dak gave him an appalled look, then jogged over to the patron for the League of Corinth. Sera and Riq followed.

"Excuse me, sir," Dak began. "We're . . . not from around here, but we have some very — and trust me when I say very, I mean very, *very* — important information for Master Aristotle."

"Want to throw in a couple more *verys*?" Riq whispered. "That'll get us in for sure."

Sera elbowed him. She was the only one with official permission to give Dak a hard time.

The old man at the desk acted as if he hadn't heard a word or seen anyone enter the building. His eyes hadn't so much as twitched.

"Sir?" Dak asked. "Can you tell us where to find Aristotle?"

Still nothing. They might as well have been talking to a statue. But Sera could see the geezer's chest moving, although his breaths were very shallow and spaced apart.

Dak shrugged. "Oh, well, at least we tried. So . . . I guess we just start walking around, yelling '*Aristooooootle*, where *arrrrrrrrrre* you?'"

"That oughta do it," Riq answered.

They moved to go around the man and his desk, heading for a set of marble stairs behind him, when the old guy suddenly sprang to his feet, fury animating his face. It seemed like an entirely different person had magically replaced the wrinkled zombie who'd been sitting there seconds earlier.

"Stop!" the man yelled, his surprisingly deep voice echoing off the high stone ceiling — in ancient Greek. "None shall enter here who has not sworn

the oath! Those not of the League shall suffer the consequences for even attempting such a breach against the hegemon!”

Sera suddenly realized their mistake. The last person they’d spoken to had been speaking English. That meant their translators were only now calibrating to ancient Greek. And *that* meant Dak had effectively been speaking gibberish to the man who stood between them and Aristotle.

A thunder of footsteps sounded from down a hallway to their left. Seconds later, at least a dozen soldiers appeared, spears pointing at the three young newcomers.

“Kill these foreigners,” the old man standing at the desk barked. “Kill them swiftly and without mercy.”

The soldiers seemed all too eager to obey, charging forward with a chorus of yells.



## Rumble on the Stairs

DAK FELT like he'd been thrown into the middle of a practical joke. This couldn't be happening. The League of Corinth was about peace, about philosophy, about negotiation, about bettering the fate of man. And now Dak had some old dude calling him names at the top of his lungs and a group of manly soldiers charging at him with big, heavy spears, their points looking sharp enough to gut a half-ton pig.

It all seemed so out of place that he almost forgot to run.

Sera grabbed him by the arm, yanking him back to cold, ugly reality.

They sprinted on the heels of Riq toward the stairs that led deeper into the building. As they rounded the wooden desk, Dak glared at the traitorous old geezer, red-faced and puffing his chest, standing at attention, shouting orders that were drowned out by the screaming soldiers. Dak thought those guys must've not seen any action in a while and wanted to make up for it by slicing three kids to tiny pieces. How had everything gone so terribly wrong?

They hit the stairs and started leaping up them two at a time. Sera had yet to let go of Dak's arm, like a mother shepherding her son. He wanted to rip it

free — he was perfectly fine to run from bad guys on his own, thank you. But his smarter side said that he might lose his balance doing such a stupid thing.

Up, up they went, the stairs seeming to multiply the more they ascended. They were only three from the top when something sharp poked Dak in the shoulder just as a hand gripped him by the ankle. He yelped and his arm came loose from Sera's grip after all as he stumbled forward, smacking his head on the blunted edge of the very top step. He had a split moment to be thankful that thousands of feet had smoothed the thing out over the years, then a soldier was on top of him. There was a clatter as the spear the man had held tumbled down the marble stairs. But it was quickly replaced by the nastiest-looking dagger Dak had ever seen — all iron and sharp edges.

A few grumbled words of gibberish came out of the dude's mouth before the translator in Dak's ear kicked back into gear. It had taken a nasty hit.

“— out sliver by sliver.”

Dak didn't want to know the first part. He struggled, squirming to get his body out from under the soldier, who had a knee placed directly in the middle of Dak's chest, pressing him into the hard steps below.

“Can't . . . breathe . . .” he sputtered out, hearing the odd echo of the device in his mouth translating the words for the jerk who held him down.

“Don't . . . care . . .” the jerk replied. The dagger pressed against Dak's chin, its pointy tip flicking to draw a droplet of blood — Dak felt it trickle down his neck.

Desperation gave him one last burst of adrenaline. He threw his knee up, slamming into the man and making him groan — a sound Dak knew he'd remember with glee the rest of his life if he somehow survived the mess. Off-balance on the precarious stairs, the soldier fell back when Dak threw all his strength forward in a final shove.

Suddenly free, Dak's elation didn't last more than a half second. Even before he could get a look around him, he remembered just how many of the armed men there had been, and just how big they were. And sure enough, to his dismay, Sera and Riq had been captured by two or three soldiers each, struggling despite having no chance at all. But Dak refused to give up.

Kicking his feet until he finally found purchase on the steps, he vaulted himself forward and ran toward two men who had Sera pinned to the ground by her arms and legs.

He yelled — screamed was more like it — as if that would give him any more of a chance. At the last second, he leapt into the air, flying for what felt like a full minute, until he crashed, shoulder first, into the soldier holding Sera's arms. Dak bounced off him like the guy was made of solid stone. He landed hard, feeling as if both his clavicles had broken, trying to focus on the spinning world of marble and stone around him, dread deflating his heart.

Then there were soldiers on *him*, grabbing at his limbs, and Dak reacted on instinct, punching and kicking worthlessly, squirming like a baby who's decided a diaper change is not in the cards. In those few seconds before defeat finally settled in to stay, thoughts flew through Dak's mind:

*Had history been changed somehow?*

*Was the League of Corinth not what he'd read about in all the books?*

*Had Aristotle gone mad? Evil?*

*Tilda.*

*The guy at the fountain, with the scars and the chrome dome.*

*The SQ.*

*Had the SQ come here? Messed everything up? Had it all been for nothing?*

The spin of questions stopped on a dime when someone punched him in the cheek, sending a swirl of stars around his head, even brighter than the marble on which he lay.

All Dak could do was look up at the soldiers and say the first thing that popped into his head.

“Why are you guys so *mean*?”



## Behind Bars Again

SERA SAT on a hard floor with her back against a hard wall, looking at iron bars through the scant light of a window she couldn't see. She was alone, her friends taken somewhere else.

It had been a while since she'd had a Remnant. She didn't know why, but assumed it was related to the fact they'd been changing the Breaks one by one. Whatever the reason, she didn't know if it made her feel better or worse. At least phantom memories of parents she'd never met *were* memories. During a Remnant she could see her mom and dad, feel them, *long* for them. And what did she have now? What did you call the memory of a memory?

None of it might matter anyway. She and her friends were once again behind bars — she couldn't help but think back to the tiny, dank cell in the lower decks of Christopher Columbus's ship — and things were not quite what Dak had expected at this so-called League of Corinth. She could tell that much just by looking in her friend's eyes as the three of them were dragged away by those less-than-kind soldiers.

Less than kind. That was *being* kind. They'd all been snakes, bordering on bloodthirsty. How could someone as intelligent as Aristotle have anything to do with such a group of bullies?

Time ticked on. Sera sat, her rear end getting sore, her muscles stiff all over, a bruise rising on her arm from where one of the men had punched her. A young girl. She thought of cataclysms and wormholes and time paradoxes to keep the boredom at bay. Eventually, her eyelids started to droop, and then finally sleep snuck in and took her.



Sometime later — in the middle of a dream where she and Dak were jumping on a trampoline and Dak kept yapping about the “long and sordid” history of metal springs — Sera was awakened by the clank of the door to her cell opening. After she rubbed the blurriness out of her eyes, she saw a soldier standing at the opening, looking slightly abashed. He reminded her of a kid who'd been caught picking his nose.

“Come,” he said, looking at the floor instead of her. “Our master wants to see you.”

*Odd*, Sera thought, but she jumped to her feet, not wanting to lose the chance to get out of the rank little prison. When she reached the soldier, he half-turned to leave but then stopped. After a long pause, he said, “I'm . . . sorry.”

“You are?” She immediately wished she could take it back, but the words had practically leapt out of her mouth. Why was this big, scary man apologizing?

“Just follow me.”

He headed off down a low-ceilinged tunnel, a perfect setting for a dungeon. Sera followed as they made their way through a few twists and turns and up a long, winding set of stairs. Neither one of them spoke as they walked. Sera breathed a satisfied sigh. It felt good to get the blood pumping and stretch her muscles a bit — not to mention seeing brighter walls and light from outside as they ascended from the depths of the building.

Soon, they reached a dark wooden door that led out to a balcony, where several chairs faced the railing and the city of Corinth beyond. To the far left Sera could make out the statue of the hegemon, where they'd met the bald stranger.

Dak and Riq were already sitting in a couple of the chairs, and they turned to see her as she walked onto the balcony. Riq waved, and Dak nodded, but neither said anything.

"Happy to see you guys are safe and sound, too," she muttered. They both smiled as if they had completely missed her sarcasm. She plopped down in the chair between her two friends, wondering if they'd refused to sit by each other on purpose. "So, what in the world is going on?" she asked.

Dak shrugged, his face far too giddy for the situation. He'd obviously been scanning the city, relishing every moment of their latest peek into the past.

"Seems like someone goofed up," Riq said. "A big, burly soldier told me how sorry he was for mistreating us, then brought me here."

"Me, too," Dak added. "My dude was so sweet about it we almost ended up hugging."

Sera stared out at the twinkle of the sea beyond the city, enjoying the breeze that had just picked up. "It's weird" was all she said in reply. That seemed to sum everything up just fine.

Several minutes passed before the person they'd been summoned to see finally arrived. Sera heard movement behind her and turned to see a tall man with salt-and-pepper hair and a beard walk in, his broad shoulders draped in flowing gray robes that made him look like a wizard. He regarded her gravely but didn't say anything as he walked around the chairs to stand before them, his back against the railing.

Ever since the day they'd met the infamous Amancio brothers and Christopher Columbus, the novelty of meeting people from history had slowly but surely waned for Sera. She knew who stood before her, and she waited patiently for either him to announce it or for Dak to blurt it out himself. In the end, it proved to be very anticlimactic.



“My name is Aristotle,” the stately man said. “I understand that you had a little mistreatment from our guards today. Let me be the first to apologize. It’s not often we get children around these halls, and I think the soldiers got a little . . . overzealous in dealing with such an unexpected threat. If we could do it over again, they might’ve treated you in a more genteel manner.”

*Genteel manner?* Sera thought. *I guess that’s how philosophers talk.* She looked over at Dak, whose earlier expression of glee had melted into a perplexed frown. The poor guy surely hadn’t thought his first encounter with the great Aristotle would go like this.

“Why did they treat us like a threat at all?” Riq asked. A bruise on his cheek showed he’d gotten more than his fair share of it. “What did they think we were going to do, bomb the place?”

Dak groaned the very instant that Sera guessed he would.

Aristotle sighed. He obviously couldn’t understand the reference to a bomb, but he didn’t ask for clarification. “We’ve had some troubling events of late, and, honestly, I don’t feel comfortable speaking about them among strangers. Please don’t mistake me. My apologies to you should not be taken as a welcome. I find no reason for you three to be here, and I can’t imagine a fitting explanation. But none the less, you are young, and the soldiers should have treated you better.”

“We really need to talk,” Dak blurted out. “About history and time travel and the SQ and Great Breaks and Remnants and the Infinity Ring and Tilda and —”

“*Dak,*” Sera said sharply, giving him one of the nastiest looks she’d ever had to give. But he’d lost control. “Hardly the best way to start the conversation. He’s going to kick us out for being lunatics.”

Riq’s head was in his hands, slowly shaking back and forth. Their first meeting with the founder of the Hystorians was getting more disastrous by the second.

Aristotle cast a long, lingering gaze on each of the three strangers. His face said nothing, but his eyes were like pools of knowledge, full of wisdom

and deep thoughts. Finally, he took a sharp breath and called for the soldiers at the door.

When one of them stepped onto the balcony and asked what was needed, Sera felt a thrilling rush at Aristotle's response.

“Bar the door and let no one through, no matter the cause. I obviously have a lot to talk about with my new friends here.”



## Talking to the Creator

DAK HAD yet to move a muscle from his chair, still transfixed by the fact that *Aristotle* was standing in front of him. *Scolding* him even. He'd always pictured the first Hystorian as a philosophizing dude who sat around reading books and every once in a while pointing his finger toward the sky and saying something wise. But the man who'd just ordered the doors to the balcony sealed was a leader if Dak had ever seen one. A hard, weathered man who'd obviously been around the block a couple of times.

Aristotle moved to the right — the guy even walked with a certain air of grandness — and grabbed a wooden stool, then brought it around so he could sit in front of the three newcomers. After taking a seat, he still towered over Dak and the others, sitting in low chairs. Something told Dak that the man had done that on purpose.

“I wouldn't be here today if I hadn't spent a lifetime trusting my instincts,” Aristotle said. “A minute ago, I was ready to throw you out, hoping you'd have been scared enough to never pull such a prank again. Hoping your parents would take you back in and do some serious . . . correcting. But you”

— he nodded his grizzled, bearded head toward Dak — “the things you said . . . I can’t ignore them. Something is going on here that I want to know about. And I want to know about it immediately. So start talking.”

Riq said nothing. Dak looked at him just in time to see his Adam’s apple visibly jump up and down.

Sera said nothing. Dak could actually *hear* her gulp.

As for Dak himself, he just wanted to make up for the ridiculous onslaught of nonsense he’d tried sputtering out the first time he spoke. But he couldn’t find the words to start.

Aristotle took each of them in with another long glance, then shook his head. “I guess no one ever taught the three of you what the word *immediately* means. Someone speak, or I may call back my soldiers and tell them I was wrong to reprimand them after all.”

A burst of courage lit up Dak’s heart. “I’ll go. I’ll . . . try to explain why we’re here.”

From his right, he heard Sera let out a relieved breath she’d been holding in her chest. Riq reached around her to pat him on the back and whispered, “Go for it.”

“Thank you,” Aristotle replied. He folded his arms and leaned so far back that Dak thought he might topple off of the stool. But his balance held steady. “I have a feeling you’re going to make a bit more sense this time around — you look to be a smart one.”

Dak smiled a forced, sad little smile. Had the creator of the Hystorians just complimented or insulted him? Both, it seemed. He took a deep breath and did as Riq had told him to. He went for it.

“Sir, I promise you I’ve never said something more important in my life — we need your help or the future of the world is in serious trouble. I’m talking, like, lots of people dying and bad guys ruling the world and everybody falling into fiery cracks in the planet’s crust as earthquakes destroy the world. That kind of trouble.”

Aristotle said nothing, which was the best Dak could hope for so far.

“This is the hard part,” he continued. “I know this is going to sound crazy, and you might get up and order those jerks to come chop my head off, but I don’t know what else to do but come out and say it and hope that you will be able to accept it.” He paused, and Aristotle’s bushy gray eyebrows rose so high they almost collided with his hairline.

“We’re from the future,” Dak finally said, working hard not to let his face squeeze up into a pathetic wince. “Far, far in the future. Like, more than a couple thousand years. As . . . I’m sure . . . someone as smart as you” — he was losing it, he was losing it — “I mean, from what we know, you’re the kind of man who wouldn’t be surprised to learn that humanity advances far enough for such a thing to happen someday. Time travel. Am I right?”

Aristotle leaned forward, those same eyebrows now crashing down to half-cover his eyes. “Boy, I’ve said before that the high-minded man must care more for the truth than for what people think. And I can tell you that the number of people in this cluster of buildings who would believe you are, well, less numerous than the nostrils on your face. But if anyone *will* believe, and if anyone will preach it once he does, then you are looking at him now.” A huge smile started to form on Dak’s face, but Aristotle wiped it away with a quick and sharp look. “*If*, I said. *If*. A word with only two letters, but as important as all the words of language combined.”

Dak, in awe of the man’s sage words, could only bring forth a nod.

Aristotle turned to Sera. “I think the boy has opened up a floodgate. Let us see if you can channel the waters. Tell me more.”

Dak looked at his friend, hoping she didn’t mess things up.

Sera cleared her throat, obviously unprepared for the sudden shift in Aristotle’s attention. “Um, well, I can vouch for what he said. We used a time-travel device to come here, to meet you, and to warn you about something really bad that’s going to happen to —”

Aristotle leapt to his feet and held his hands out to silence Sera. “Now, wait, please. I’m not sure any of us are ready for such a leap. I believe time to be a fragile thing, as well as the fabric of reality from which it’s woven, and it worries me to hear of what may be or what may not.” He sat back down, his

face troubled, looking at the floor as if for answers written in the stone. “My teacher of teachers . . . Years ago, we talked about such things, he and I. I’m not sure if he’s known in your . . . time.”

“Plato,” Dak blurted out before he could pause to think. “You and Plato will be known throughout history as two of the brightest minds . . . ever. You guys are totally famous.”

The philosopher relaxed once again, leaning back on his stool. “Like I said, I’ve always trusted my instinct, and the fact that we still sit here, speaking to one another, means that it has yet to warn me against your words. But . . .” He trailed off, scratching his beard and looking up into the sky.

Dak couldn’t let Aristotle make the same choice Lincoln had. If they were going to fix the Prime Break, they needed the man’s help. Dak glanced over at Sera, then at Riq. “You haven’t said anything yet. Pipe in and help us out a little.”

“Yes,” Aristotle added, seeming almost hopeful as he focused on Riq. “You appear older than these two. Perhaps we’ve saved the best for last.”

Dak felt a prick of jealousy, and expected a smug look from Riq. When the older boy didn’t throw it at him, Dak decided once and for all that their issues were officially a thing of the past. At least for a few minutes.

“Listen,” Riq began as he leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. “This is really hard for all of us, I think. It makes me feel better that you seem so worried about time and messing it up. It shows you get it. But we’re here to tell you that things are *already* messed up. With . . .” He faltered for a second, looking to Dak and Sera for support, then surging ahead. “With your permission, we want to tell you about the future. Because we need your help to make things right. You’ll just . . . have to trust us that it’s okay to talk about. But we won’t until you say it’s okay.”

A long moment of silence passed, Aristotle passing his eyes from Riq to Sera to Dak, then starting all over again. And again. Dak could almost see the wheels spinning behind those eyes.

“I’ve made my decision,” the man finally said. “I want you to tell me everything you came here to say. And then we shall see where we are and

what may come.”

Sera and Riq both looked at Dak. It was his moment to shine.



## The Python Interrupts Again

AND SO Dak went at it, spilling everything in a torrent of information that barely left him time to take proper breaths. About the Great Breaks, Aristotle's belief that they needed to be corrected, his belief in eventual time travel, how the Hystorians came into existence because of his vision, the SQ . . . everything. After he'd told the story of the far future and how he and his friends had been sent back in time to set things right — and to find his missing parents — he quickly went through the list of the Breaks they'd conquered so far. And then it was time for the kicker. The final task.

“In three weeks,” Dak said, “an assassin is going to kill King Philip and his son Alexander the Third.” The look of complete horror that transformed Aristotle's face made Dak stop before he went any further.

The man appeared as if he might cry. His lip trembled, his eyes grew dark, his entire body seemed to shrink.



“This can’t be,” he said, his steady, regal voice cracking for the first time. “I taught the boy, practically raised him through the better part — the most important part — of his youth. He’s . . . destined to do great, great things. Change the world. I know it, in my heart, without any doubt. This . . . this can’t *be*.”

Dak had expected the philosopher to be troubled, but the reaction went far beyond his wildest expectations. Aristotle looked like a man who’d just been told his son had been killed. Which, evidently, was for all intents and purposes what had happened. The man was visibly traumatized.

But then he composed himself, the stately leader and teacher regaining his footing. He stood tall, brushed at his robes, then sat back down again, ramrod straight, looking as if he’d never been bothered at all. Dak’s admiration grew.

“Your words ring true,” Aristotle said, “and if this truly did . . . or does . . . happen, then my reaction is exactly as your Hystorians have taught you. Such a thing would devastate me, indeed, and I’d do anything to reverse that course.” He paused. “We’ve had trouble lately. Strangers appearing, wreaking havoc. Strangers who are nothing like Greeks or Macedonians at all.”

Dak and his friends exchanged looks. The dude at the fountain. Tilda was up to something, no doubt.

“It’s why my guards have been so vigilant,” Aristotle continued. “So vicious. I ordered them to be so. I wasn’t about to let anything get in the way of the League and our plans for this great nation and the world.” His eyes found Sera’s. “Can you show me the device? Your words *do* ring true, but it would be foolish for me not to have the proof of it.”

Sera was digging through her satchel before he’d even finished his last sentence. Dak found he couldn’t wait for the philosopher to hold a piece of the future, right there in his hands.

The Ring was dented but shiny, and it glowed with an inner light. Dak knew there could be no doubt such a thing came from a distant future. Aristotle held the device, turning it over and over, studying it with a look of pure wonder.

“Oh, that my master was still here with us,” the philosopher said. “If Plato could have seen this, he and I would have spent a year and a day talking over it. I miss the man. I miss him like my own father.” He finally — almost reluctantly — gave it back to Sera. “Tell me more of what you know about Alexander’s death. If the only thing you’ve come here to ask of me today is to prevent my student from being murdered . . . Well, you could have saved your breath about all the rest. I would do anything for that boy. Though he’s a man now, I suppose. A man grown, and a great one at that.”

A rush of excitement had started to fill Dak’s bones. They were on the cusp now — the cusp of finishing what they’d started for the Hystorians. It was right here for the taking. With Aristotle’s help, stopping the assassin should be relatively easy. If nothing else, the philosopher could just tell his former student to stay hidden in the wings, to avoid seeing his father for a while.

They could do this. They could really do this! Prevent the Cataclysm. One look at Sera and the light in her eyes showed she was thinking the same thing.

Riq spoke up. “Like Dak said, it’s supposed to happen in about three weeks. The assassin, Pausanius, plans to kill King Philip with poison, right there in his big ol’ tent where he and his army are camped, preparing for their huge assault on Asia Minor. The oopsie part is that Alexander will be there, on a surprise visit, and Pausanius will end up killing them both.”

“Now, wait a moment,” Aristotle said, leaning forward with a look of worry on his face. “Two concerns. One, Pausanius seems an unlikely man for the job. He’s been a loyal bodyguard for Philip for years. He must be manipulated by someone else. And I would wager every minute I ever spent with Plato that Attalas is the man behind the murder. He’s been ambitious from day one for his grandson, Karanos, to become the hegemon some day. And it would do him no good unless he killed both Philip *and* Alexander.”

“Which is exactly what happens,” Riq rebutted.

“Yes, but you said that Pausanius didn’t know — *doesn’t* know I should say — that Alexander will be there. If this is about installing Karanos as king, I highly doubt the conspirators would plan the attack unless they knew for

sure that both father and son would fall together. I can promise you that they would never have another opportunity after one murder or the other done alone.”

Dak was itching — almost literally — to take over from there, but with some spark of kindness dredged up from the bottom of his depths, he let Riq have the fun.

“That’s the key, sir,” Riq said. “According to our history books, everyone agrees with you and thinks that Attalus is behind the murder, but it’s a cover-up. The true mastermind is Olympias.”

“The boy’s *mother*?” Aristotle asked in a rage, almost as if he’d been accused himself.

Riq nodded, and so did Dak when the philosopher looked at him for confirmation of the shocking news.

“She was even more ambitious than Attalus,” Sera added. “She wanted Alexander to be king, and she wanted it immediately. She didn’t want to wait for Philip to die or be killed. The plan obviously backfires.”

Dak felt like he had to throw something out there. “As for Pausanias, it’s true he is the king’s bodyguard, but a lot of people will do anything for the right money. Or for power. We’ve learned that the hard way.”

Aristotle scratched his beard. “My heart can scarcely bear it. I love Olympias as well. She is a sweet, sweet woman, who thinks the world of her son.”

“Sounds like a Shakespeare play,” Dak mused. “Mother arranges for her son to be king, but her schemes end up killing him.”

“Shakespeare?” Aristotle repeated.

“Never mind.”

Sera rubbed her hands together. “So . . . you probably have a lot of influence with Alexander still. Right? All we need to do is make sure you keep him away from his father and away from Pausanias.”

“Yeah,” Dak said. “Easy-peasy.” He wasn’t sure that translated too well because the philosopher’s eyes wrinkled up in confusion.

But then the man let out a huge breath and leaned back in his stool once again. “So be it. As I’ve said, I’ll do anything to prevent this murder. I didn’t spend all those years teaching Alexander just to have him poisoned by a traitor’s hand. I’ll have my people contact him first thing in —”

The door to the balcony burst open, slamming against the wall and rebounding to knock a man almost clear off his feet. He had black hair and a studious face, which was now lit with something close to terror. His skin was milky pale. Recovering his composure — only slightly — he more gently pushed the door all the way open, then stared at Aristotle expectantly. The philosopher had stood up, and Dak saw a bit of worry bleeding through the man’s normally graceful demeanor.

“Python,” Aristotle said. “The last time you so interrupted me upon a balcony, it was for great news. Something tells me the winds blow a different and darker direction today.”

The newcomer looked even graver than when he’d first burst in. “Teacher, I’m afraid I have horrible, horrible tidings.” He gave a wary look at the three young strangers sitting in the balcony chairs.

“Don’t worry about them,” Aristotle urged. “Just spit it out, now. What’s happened?”

Python’s eyes brimmed with tears. “Your former student Alexander. Alexander the Third. Son of our great hegemon —”

“Yes, I know who he is!” the philosopher snapped. “Is he in danger?”

Python swallowed and his eyes fell to the floor. “He’s been murdered. Killed by a woman with hair of flames and lips of tar.”



## Predicament

SERA HAD never felt so stunned by someone's words. She sat in her chair and stared at the man named Python, wondering if she had heard him correctly. More like, *hoping* she hadn't. They were supposed to have three weeks to prevent the Prime Break from happening. And the woman with hair of flames . . .

"You're certain of this?" Aristotle asked his servant, after what felt like a very long silence.

Python nodded, grim-faced. He obviously didn't enjoy being the one to relay such an awful message.

Aristotle slumped back onto his stool, every ounce of blood having drained from his face. Even his beard seemed to sag and wilt, along with the rest of his countenance. "How certain, Python? I must know."

"They have his body, my master. There can be no doubt."

"Then leave us."

Sera expected the man to be thrilled to get out of there, but, impossibly, he looked even sadder. “Yes, teacher. Please let me know if there is anything I can do.” Python bowed and left, closing the door as he went.

“He’s been so good to me,” Aristotle whispered, staring at the stone of the balcony floor. “Been with me for so many years. I should treat him with more kindness.”

It seemed like an odd thing to say, but Sera felt a little disoriented herself. She knew they had a billion things to talk about now, but she couldn’t find one word to utter. In fact, no one spoke for a good long while.

“What’re we going to do?” Riq finally asked, a simple enough question. The answer, not so much.

“Need I ask the obvious?” Aristotle responded. “You came here, told me of an elaborate future wrought with difficulty, and showed me a device that my own eyes are wise enough to tell me is not a ruse. I believe that you three are from another time and place. And yet, you sat there and told me the details of a murder that was to happen three weeks from now. You’ve thrown my mind into a cloud of doubt and mistrust, I must say.” He looked apologetic as he said it, as if he didn’t want to disappoint them. But Sera knew he had every right to think them a bunch of liars now. For all he knew, they were in league with Alexander’s murderer.

“It’s Tilda,” Dak said. Sera and Riq had been thinking it — what else *could* they think — but Dak was the first to throw it out there. “We all know it. She came back and took care of business herself before we could even have a chance to fix it. I swear I’m gonna rip every red hair off that woman’s head next time I see her.”

“That’ll teach her,” Riq muttered under his breath.

“Tell me of this Tilda,” Aristotle said. “Tell me everything.”

For once, Dak didn’t seem too eager to spew any information from his over-clogged head, but he did so anyway.

“Tilda is also a time traveler,” he said. “But she’s with the SQ — the bad guys. She wants the Breaks to happen, because each and every one leads to a future where she’s rich and powerful, never mind the consequences.”

Alexander's death is the event that leads to the creation of the SQ. She made sure it happened before any of us would expect it. She beat us at our own game!"

"And what does that mean for us?" Aristotle asked.

Sera answered, unable to prevent her mind from picturing the Remnants of her parents, and thinking how the chance of ever seeing them again — of ever getting to know them — might have just been squandered.

"It means despite our best efforts, the fabric of time and reality has just been . . . ripped, torn. Broken. Tilda has set off a chain reaction that will one day be too much for physics to handle anymore."

"And then comes the Cataclysm," Dak added.

"Yep," Sera agreed sadly. "The end of the world."

Aristotle was studying them intently as they spoke. "But you were able to fix these other Breaks, correct?"

Sera nodded.

"Then maybe having just one go wrong won't be too much. Maybe . . . Oh, what am I saying. Right now my heart doesn't care a bit about all of that. I've lost one of the most precious people I've ever known."

And then, shocking everyone, Aristotle — the great and majestic philosopher, master of ethics, teacher, scientist, poet — broke down and started bawling, chest hitching with sobs, tears streaming down his face into that famous beard.

Sera didn't know what else to do. She got up and pulled the man into a hug. He certainly didn't respond, but he didn't pull away either. The episode lasted for just a minute or two and then he regained his composure. Sera went back to her chair and sat down, looking at Dak, then Riq. They had to decide what to do, but in everything they'd been through so far, no matter how awful, at least they'd had Hystorians and clues and guides as to what to do next.

Not so now. They were at the end of the line, and all bets were off. Like never before, Sera and her friends were totally, completely on their own.

"You know what we have to do, right?" Dak asked.

Sera did, but the very thought terrified her. “You want to go back in time again. Stop Tilda before she can kill Alexander. But it throws all our plans off — how do we know we won’t alter history even worse? Or set reality up to break a thousand more times? This is uncharted territory.”

“Yeah, it is,” Riq agreed. “But what else are we going to do? Say ‘Oh, well’ and just go back to the future, hang out on the back porch until our house falls into a river of exploding lava?”

Sera sighed. “Of course not. I’m just saying it’s scary and we have no idea what to expect. This isn’t a video game we can just reset.”

“Why are you being so negative?” Dak shot back. In all the years of their friendship, she thought it might be the first time he’d ever truly hurt her feelings. She felt his words like a dagger. “We all know there’s no choice here. Alexander is dead, and Aristotle told us” — he eyed the philosopher with a You-know-what-I-mean glance — “that his dying is the first Break. The Prime Break. The Break that started it all. So nothing else matters. There’s no decision to make. We go back and we save him. Boom, that’s it.”

Sera wanted to strangle him for sounding so arrogant. The only problem was that her best friend was totally right. What else *could* they do?

“Well?” Dak pushed.

“Quit acting like you just found the cure for cancer,” Riq muttered. “We all know that’s what we have to do.”

Sera nodded, refusing to let her pride get in the way. She knew that part of her problem was worrying about her parents and the Remnants. It scared her to death to stray from the plan that had seemed to be leading her to an actual reunion with them in the future. But she was being stupid. If the Hystorians were right, then Alexander’s death presented a much bigger problem. It had to be undone, no matter what the cost.

Dak seemed to sense he’d been a little forceful. “What do you think we should do, Sera?”

“Go back. Stop Tilda. You’re right.” There, she said it. And the way he nodded in response saved her from any more wounded pride.

Riq clapped his hands once, loudly, then stood up. “Then let’s get on it.”



Aristotle rose as well, very slowly, looking back and forth between the other three with a very uncertain expression. “Are we . . . sure about this?”

Sera and her two friends nodded immediately.

The philosopher straightened and appeared much more confident. “Then I’m going with you. And I don’t want to hear any argument about it. I’m going and that’s that.”

Dak blew a loud breath through his lips. “Why would we argue? We need your help, dude.”

The translator didn’t like that last word so much — it sounded more like a burp.

Aristotle started walking toward the balcony door. “We’ll find out everything we need to know from Python, and then off we go. I just hope that toy of yours actually works.”



If Dak could’ve chosen anyone to go on a time-traveling adventure with, it was a no-brainer that it’d be Abraham Lincoln. But Aristotle was a pretty good second choice. After talking to Python for an hour or so and learning everything they possibly could about the details of what had happened, Dak, Sera, Riq, and the philosopher were ready to go back in time — they’d decided on three days to be safe — and stop Tilda.

The lady with hair of flames and lips of tar.

It made Dak think of Medusa, who was *almost* as bad as Tilda.

They stood on a patch of dirt behind the official stables of the League of Corinth. The sun had started to set in the west, and Aristotle said that he highly doubted there’d be anyone around.

In the waning light of day, the philosopher stared at the Infinity Ring as Sera pulled it out. “I’ve programmed in the time and the location,” she said.

*Olympias’s palace*, Dak thought. *The home of Alexander and his mom.* Back when this had all begun, if he’d made a list of one million places they might have to visit throughout history, that one probably wouldn’t have made the list.

“Is this going to hurt?” the philosopher asked as he put his hand on the cool metal of the Ring.

“No,” Sera answered simply. Dak didn’t know if that was the most honest answer ever, but it seemed to make their famous friend feel better.

They stood in a circle, the sky above them fading from orange to purple, four right hands clinging to the Infinity Ring in the middle of their group. Sera ignited the device into action and sparkles of light flashed in the air.

Just before they were swept away, something happened that made Dak’s stomach almost leap through his throat and out of his mouth. About twenty feet away from where they stood, four people suddenly appeared, almost as if they were falling out of the sky, their images flashing into existence just long enough for Dak to see who they were.

Himself.

Sera.

And a man and woman he’d never seen before.

It was only for an instant, but enough for Dak’s mind to explode with confusion. He was staring at *himself*, and the other version of him looked back with an odd expression of understanding. It was unnerving, confusing, and Dak didn’t like it one bit.

Then the sky ripped open and sucked them into the oblivion of a wormhole.



## The Gardens of Olympias

RIQ COULDN'T believe what he'd just seen. It happened so quickly he thought that he had to have imagined it, that he was seeing things in the moment before they were sucked into the wormhole.

He didn't love the feeling of his body being pulled and stretched and compressed by a billion forces all at once, but at least he'd grown somewhat used to it. Not to mention the sounds and the lights and the wind that wasn't really a wind. But he couldn't help but feel sorry for Aristotle — who wasn't exactly young and spry — as they traveled through the space-time continuum.

Like always, Riq had a hard time comprehending just how long it took for them to make the leap. Only moving three days, you'd think it would be a quicker warp than usual. But it didn't always seem to work that way. Regardless, there was the mind-numbing intensity of it all, the world exploding and contracting and streaking all around him, and then it was over.

He tumbled onto a bed of short-cut grass, then slammed into a big green hedge with prickly leaves. The whole thing shook above him as if it were laughing. Dak's foot smacked him in the face, and he heard Sera asking Aristotle if he was okay. The man coughed, then groaned, then *laughed*. He actually laughed.

Riq got to his feet and brushed himself off, relieved to see the great philosopher doing the same thing, all in one piece and with no obvious injuries. The man looked as excited as a kid at a birthday party, practically floating.

“Oh, if Plato could see me now!” he yelled, obviously forgetting that they were supposed to be on a stealthy mission to save his former student.

“Aristotle, traveler of time!” Riq was pretty sure he’d never seen anything quite so ridiculous as the great philosopher dancing on his toes and making such a pronouncement.

Sera was smiling, and Riq instantly knew that she hadn’t seen what he’d seen. Dak couldn’t have looked any more opposite from her — troubled and confused — which meant that he *had* seen it.

Dak and Sera’s duplicates. And two strangers.

And no Riq.

What exactly did that mean?

“I hate to dampen the party atmosphere,” Riq said, “but we have to stop Tilda *and* I think Dak and I saw something that you guys didn’t.” He went on to describe what he’d seen.

Dak’s face was pale — seeing himself had obviously shaken him up a bit. “It was weird.” Riq had to admit that although the kid didn’t have his language expertise, that summed it up perfectly. Sera didn’t even bother with the standard doubtful comebacks.

“Who do you think the man and woman were?” she asked.

“Explain what they looked like,” Aristotle added, his elation from a moment earlier popped like a balloon.

It had only been an instant, but Riq could still see them in his mind. “The man had brown hair, tall. The lady had black hair, green eyes, thin face, some kind of weird jewel on a necklace around her neck.”

“Was it an amethyst?” the philosopher asked.

“*Umm*, no idea.” Riq was a translator, not a geologist. “But I think it was purple.”

Aristotle shrugged, a comical thing to see on such a great man. “An amethyst, then. The woman you saw was Olympias, Alexander’s mother. In fact, we may be meeting her any second now.” His eyes focused on something behind Riq’s shoulder.

Riq turned around and finally got a good glimpse of the space beyond the giant hedge he’d plowed into upon arrival. Before them lay a vast expanse of gardens — green grass and bushes and flowers and fountains and trees — all arranged in a maze of sorts that reminded him of something out of a fantasy novel. Beyond that there stood a massive house built in the Greek style, with pillars and frescoes and friezes. Small statues lined the walkway that led from the main fountain to the stairs below the back entrance to the palace.

Palace.

*That’s definitely the right word*, Riq thought. Alexander had some sweet digs.

“Philip is a rich man,” Aristotle said, looking on with the rest of them at the grand structure. “Let’s just say this is his way of keeping his former wife happy.”

Dak started to say something, but before he could even get one word out, a door burst open on the side of the palace and three men came charging out with swords in their hands. Three huge, vicious black dogs, barking and growling, followed on their heels, and then one of the guards shouted, his voice a boom of thunder.

“There they are! Appeared out of nowhere! Sic ’em, hounds, sic ’em!”



Dak had always thought dogs were cute. These things weren’t dogs. These things were big, hungry monsters that wanted to eat him alive. And with his luck, he would probably be the tastiest of his friends.

“Aristotle!” he yelled. “Tell them who we are!” He’d expected to fight Tilda, but not the people they’d come to save from her.

The philosopher appeared to think for a second about shouting at the men with the swords, but then gave up. Those nasty dogs were charging in way too

fast.

“I think at times like this it may be wisest to run,” he said. Even on the cusp of death-by-slobbery-fangs, the dude sounded like a philosopher.

“Run!” Dak yelled, getting to the point a lot more quickly. But then he saw that Riq and Sera had already done that, heading for an area with a bunch of those tall hedges — maybe thinking they could find a place to hide. Aristotle took off after them, lifting his robes like a lady in a dress tiptoeing through a mud puddle. He was fast for an older guy.

Dak took a step to go in the same direction, but then the dogs were on him, seeming like they’d leapt ahead at an impossible speed. The beasts got between Dak and the rest of his friends, and to his chagrin they all decided they wanted to focus on the history nerd.

For some reason the words *sweet meat* ran through his head as he froze, staring at the hideous, slavering monsters, who stared right back at him, their thick throats vibrating with deep growls.

“Nice pups,” Dak said, slowly backing away. They inched forward, matching his movement, telling him with their eyes that he’d better stay put if he wanted to live another five minutes. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that the guards themselves were sprinting through the gardens, almost on him.

Dak held his hands up to the sky, as if someone had a gun pointed at him. “I’m a good guy!” he yelled. “I’m here to save —”

The dogs didn’t like him talking. All three of them jumped forward, jaws snapping.

A horrible shriek escaped Dak’s throat as adrenaline exploded inside of him. He dove to his left and rolled, barely avoiding the teeth of the lead dog. Then he was on his feet, scrambling around the corner of the original hedge they’d all rolled into when the Infinity Ring warped them there.

The howls and barks of the dogs sounded behind him, and he swore he could feel their breaths on the back of his neck. Dak ran as hard as he could, knowing that he had zero chance of outrunning the drooling monsters. He

rounded another corner and saw a big stone dais that had a statue of Plato standing on top of it. It was his only chance.

He jumped onto a small square ledge at the bottom, then vaulted himself onto the dais itself. One of the dogs got the bottom of his robe in its mouth, but Dak was able to rip it free, then climb a little higher onto Plato, who didn't seem to mind too much.

Dak was just high enough to stay alive. Below him, the dogs leapt and barked and snapped those sharp teeth at him.

"Nice pups," Dak repeated, feeling about as ridiculous as he ever had before in his life. He wondered for a moment whether these beasts might be the ancestors of his old friend Vígi.

Just then one of the soldiers arrived — the others must have pursued Aristotle and his friends. The man was young, only nineteen or twenty by the look of it. Dark, curly hair covered his head, and eyes of steel — one blue and one brown — looked on Dak with anger. The guy had a breastplate that gleamed, and huge muscles in all the right places. One tough dude.

"I swear I'm a good guy," Dak pleaded, his arms getting tired from clinging to the statue.

"I bet you are," the guard responded. He hefted his bright, shiny, sharp sword and pointed it at Dak. "But I'll never become Alexander the Great if I believe the lies of my enemies."

Dak's jaw dropped even as the man he was supposed to save stepped forward to kill him.



## A Golden Throne

SERA WALKED briskly beside Aristotle, Riq, and two of the three guards who'd come bursting out of the house with the dogs. It hadn't taken long for the philosopher to convince them that they meant no harm. But they still had a problem. There was no sign of Dak, and no sign of the dogs, who'd looked awfully hungry when they'd chased him through the gardens.

"I hope Dak isn't dog food," Riq muttered as they searched the hedges for their friend.

Sera smacked him on the arm. "Not funny."

"It's kinda funny," he responded. When she gave him a look of death, he laughed. "Don't worry. Do you really think they'd just let their dogs kill a young boy playing in the yard? I'm sure he's —"

He stopped when they turned a corner of towering hedges and saw the scene before them. If Riq had thought things were funny before, now they might seem hilarious, though Sera just felt a swelling of relief.

Dak hung on a statue of a man, his hands gripping the arms and his legs wrapped around the torso. The dogs were at the base of the dais on which the



statue stood, barking and chomping, slobber flinging in all directions. And then there was a soldier, tall and strong, holding a sword so that its tip rested right under Dak's chin. But the guard was grinning, and it was obvious he had no intention of actually cutting the boy's throat. The young man was probably just trying to teach a lesson, and maybe enjoying it a little too much.

"Alex," Aristotle said in a commanding voice. "Put down that sword this instant! And call off these bloodthirsty dogs before someone gets a foot bitten off."

Riq snickered beside Sera, and instead of smacking him this time she joined in, hoping Dak didn't notice her laughing.

One of the other guards went up and barked some orders at the dogs — he actually sounded a lot like them — and they suddenly ran off, not seeming so violent anymore. Alex — and Sera could only assume that this was the person they'd come over two thousand years into the past to save — stepped back and lowered his sword, a huge smile spreading across his handsome face. Dark curls bounced as he swung his head to see his former tutor.

"Master," he said. "You should really send word before you come to visit Mother and me." His initial glee was dampened a bit by a dark look. "I also trust you'll have an explanation as to why you appeared out of nowhere in the gardens *behind* our home."

Aristotle walked forward and gave Alexander a big hug. "Of course, my boy. Of course. We'll explain everything." He took a step back, his hands still gripping the shoulders of his student. "But I just can't tell you how happy I am to see you alive and well. My heart is soaring."

Sera understood why he was showing so much emotion. Just an hour earlier he'd been told his most famous pupil had been killed, and yet here he stood now, safe and sound.

Alexander himself, of course, didn't quite get it. "I just visited with you a month ago. And there's not much around here that could hurt me besides some garden tools. Save your worries, master, for the day I go to battle with my father, the hegemon."

When he spoke, Alexander had a grandness about him that impressed Sera. Even though he looked young, there was just something . . . *majestic* about him.

“Um, excuse me?”

Sera and everyone else looked at Dak, still hanging from the statue.

“The dogs are gone,” Riq said. “Is there a reason you’re still hanging up there like an ugly tree ornament?”

“Yes, actually. It was easy to get up here with dogs trying to bite me, but I’m not sure how to get back down. And as much as I love Plato . . .”

Riq and Sera stepped forward and provided footholds and balance as Dak climbed to the ground. Then the boy smoothed his clothes and heaved a big sigh.

“Tough work running from man-eating beasts,” he said. “You guys should try it sometime.”

They all stood silent for a moment, awkwardness hanging in the air like drapes. Then Aristotle finally broke the ice.

“Introductions!” he exclaimed, a little too excitedly. He cleared his throat, then proceeded to tell who was who, and of course Dak shook Alexander’s hand when it came to be his turn.

“I’ve always wanted to meet you,” Dak said. “Even though I didn’t honestly know a lot about you until the Hyst —”

“Very good, very good,” Aristotle interrupted. “Now that we’re all friends, let us retire to the palace and get comfortable. Alex, I don’t think I need to tell you that there’s a lot to talk about.”

The young man nodded, then finally sheathed his sword. “Yes, sounds like a fine plan, master. But I must warn you . . .”

“About what?” the philosopher prodded.

Alexander took a second to look at the people he’d just met. “I don’t think my mother is going to be very happy to see you.”



As pretty as the outside of Olympias's palace was, the inside took Sera's breath away. Alexander's mother — or her decorator — had an obvious taste for the international. There was pottery from Egypt, rugs from Persia, bronze statues from Italy, furniture of all sizes and shapes, not one piece looking like it came from the same place as another. Sera wished she could transport the entire house into the future — she'd love to live in a place with so much variety and personality.

As for Olympias herself, she was as glamorous and beautiful as her palace.

Black hair hung to her waist, with ribbons and chains of silver and gold interwoven in intricate designs throughout. Her gown seemed to glow, white and shiny, which brought out her flawless olive skin and blazing green eyes. The amethyst mentioned earlier hung in the hollow of her neck. She even had perfect teeth, and Sera had the thought that it should be against some universal law for people to look so good.

"I did not invite you here," she said to Aristotle after Alexander introduced them all to her. They were sitting in some kind of fancy parlor, with cushion-laden wooden furniture and colorful tapestries hanging on the walls. One huge window let in a burst of golden sunlight. Olympias was the only one standing, towering like the statue of Plato outside.

"No, you did not," Aristotle said, surprisingly firm after the diss. "But I assure you we have vital reasons for being here. We only need a few moments of your time to explain."

Not so much as a muscle twitched on the face of Olympias. "Time that I do not have."

The philosopher finally stood to put himself on the same level as their hostess. "I would expect better treatment after all I've done for your son, my lady. I've come to learn of a threat that poses great danger to that very boy." He glanced at Alexander, who sat quietly in a chair located in the corner of the room — he seemed to be analyzing every word, every movement, content to wait for more information. "I highly recommend you take a seat and hear us out."

Olympias eyed the man, not moving for what seemed to Sera like a full hour. But then she finally smiled, acting as if she'd been doing so since the moment they met. After a brief nod of her head, she took a seat in the biggest chair in the room, one that was draped in silk and appeared to be made out of solid gold. She looked for all the world like a queen on her throne.

"Very well," she said in a stately manner. Then her eyes found a spot on a couch, right next to Sera. "Please, sit." Somehow she'd turned things around to make Aristotle seem like the obstinate one.

But the philosopher was unfazed. He plopped down ungracefully and started talking. "We've uncovered an assassination plot."

For the first time, the lady's demeanor broke a little — eyes widened in shock, a little tremor in her mouth. And Sera knew why. She probably thought Aristotle was talking about her plan to have King Philip murdered. But she recovered and waited to hear more.

"Someone wants your son dead, Olympias," Aristotle continued. "And I can't tell you why or how we know, but we do, and we know that she is coming here to do it. We must work together to prevent it from happening."

"And why should I believe you?" Olympias responded. Sera wanted to growl like the dogs earlier — she really didn't like this woman.

"Because you trusted me for years to tutor your son and raise him in the ways of wisdom and light. If you doubt me, or refuse to protect him, then I'd have to conclude that you have your own ill tidings planned for the very near future."

The tension in the room was strung as tightly as a piano wire. Sera held her breath.

Olympias waited. And waited. And waited. She had the patience of a crocodile. Finally, she answered, and Sera didn't know if she would ever breathe again when she heard the words.

"You must be talking about my new friend. The woman named Tilda."



## Lesson Learned

DAK WANTED to stand up, scream and yell, demand answers. But he was so stunned by what Olympias had said that he just sat there, staring at her. The others reacted the same. Alexander's mother knew she'd gotten them good.

"She told me this might happen," Olympias continued when no one questioned her statement. "We've been meeting at the market, and she's become a very good friend. She's so . . . different, with that red hair that shines in the sun like fired iron. I can hardly wait for our meetings. In fact, I've invited her to come and meet Alexander soon. It's not often I allow guests into my home."

Dak closed his eyes for a second and shook his head. *What in the world was going on here?*

Alexander spoke next from his chair in the corner. "Would someone please explain this nonsense? My teacher says that someone plans to kill me, and then my mother says her new market friend told her this would happen. Explain."

Dak looked at him in awe. The heir to the hegemon sat with his ankles casually crossed, leaning back, and yet he radiated a sense of command. It even seemed to affect his mom. She stammered a bit and then did her best to answer.

“Tilda is a wonderful, sweet, compassionate person, my son. She told me the entire story of how these . . . children” — she gave a very nasty glare to each one of them — “had escaped their homes and fled to our land, bent on causing trouble. I won’t bore you with the details, but suffice it to say that they have a vendetta against my beautiful friend, and she told me they’d come here, saying wicked things about her. Her wisdom and foresight is evident.”

Dak couldn’t take another second of this ridiculousness. “She’s brainwashed you! That’s what she does. All nice and sweet until she stabs you in the back. Ever think there’s an actual *reason* we’d come here to say bad things about her? If she’s so perfect, why would she have to *warn* you that we’d . . . warn you about her?” Dak groaned. He was sounding like an idiot.

Sera seemed to agree, shooting him her special look. “What my friend’s trying to say is that this woman, Tilda, is really good at convincing people to do what she says. She’s the leader of a . . . group that’s very . . . evil.” It was her turn to groan.

Dak hid his smile. At least he wasn’t alone on the idiot train.

Olympias stood, folded her arms, and took a few steps forward. “I think I’ve lived long enough, seen enough, met enough people to be able to take care of myself. I know when a soul is good, and when a soul is . . . what was the word you used?” She looked at Sera. “Evil, I believe. Yes, I know. Trust me, I know very well. . . .” She trailed off with that last part, her gaze going distant, and Dak knew she was thinking of King Philip. The man who’d broken her heart and stood in the way of her son’s ascendance.

“Olympias, please.” Aristotle used a soft voice. “Please listen to us. Please trust us. I spent a good part of my life teaching your son — preparing him for a great future. I couldn’t bear it if he were to lose his life. Alex is in danger, and I firmly believe that it’s all because of this woman. This . . . Tilda.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she responded. “I’m well protected anyway. When she comes here, if I sense any —”

“Mother!” Alexander shouted. He jolted from his chair and practically charged to where she stood — Dak thought for a split second he might tackle her like a rogue linebacker. But he stopped in front of her and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Did you tell this woman where we live? Where our home is? Did you?”

Olympias appeared shocked by the outburst, eyes wide, leaning back from her son. She finally nodded timidly, and Dak wondered if maybe she was snapping out of her brainwashed delusion of Tilda.

Alexander pulled her into a hug, then kissed her on the cheek. “I love you, Mama, but I would fall backward off the tallest ship into a sea of sharks if my teacher told me to. I trust him with my life, heart, and soul. You should not have done this thing. You shouldn’t have told her where we live.”

“You trust *him* more than me?” she replied, her expression showing pure heartbreak.

“It’s not the Olympiad. It’s not a race. I trust you both.”

Besides the sweet glorious glee of hearing Alexander actually mention the Olympics — which originated in his country long before they renewed it in the modern day — Dak felt unsettled. Things just didn’t seem to be going well, or the way he expected. Tilda was too smart.

He noticed Aristotle was looking at him.

“Any suggestions?” the man asked him.

Dak wished he had that moment on video. Aristotle asking him for advice.

“I say we lock Alexander in a closet and have his guards and dogs right outside the door for a week.” It’d never happen, but Dak didn’t know how else to make sure — absolutely sure — that Tilda couldn’t get to him.

Alex pulled out his sword and pointed it at Dak. “Remember the lesson you were supposed to learn on that statue? Do I look like the kind of person who’d allow someone to lock me in a closet?”

Dak shook his head, liking this guy more by the minute.

“That’s a good student.” He sheathed his sword. “Now, come. We’re going to the market to hunt down this woman that everyone seems to think wants me dead. She has her own lesson to learn.”

Without waiting for a response — as if he expected any human who ever crossed his path in life to obey his commands without question — Alexander walked out of the room. Dak followed happily at his heels.





## Visitor

RIQ FELL in line with everyone else as they marched through the grand halls of the palace and out the front door, finally walking down huge marble steps onto a wide lawn. It spread out like a green sea before them, and Alexander didn't hesitate a second as he stomped onto it and kept moving, his muscles clenched as if he wanted to run instead.

The two guards who'd accompanied him earlier had appeared, hurrying to get right behind him. Then came Aristotle, walking with confident strides. Next was Olympias, having lost every ounce of the stately, towering demeanor she'd shown earlier.

After them, Riq, Sera, and Dak tried to keep up, side by side, Sera in the middle.

Riq leaned in toward her. "You think she'll be there?"

"I don't know," Sera said with a shrug. "But since we've probably already altered what she originally intended to do, we need to stay close to Alexander."

Dak made a scoffing sound. “Like we can do anything to protect him. Look at that dude. He could take down three bears with his pinkie.”

“Did you lose your brain somewhere?” Sera responded. “We just found out that Tilda killed him.”

“Yeah, but she probably sneaked up on him or something. Now that we warned him, I bet he’ll be fine. Man, for all we know, we’ve already fixed the Prime Break. Holy cow. What if that’s true?”

Riq had only been half listening, seeing movement up ahead, beyond where the huge lawn met a road. A group of people, maybe. But what Dak said really struck him. The kid could be right. Totally right. His heart lifted a little.

Then he got a better glimpse of what lay ahead. “Who are those guys up there?” he asked. There seemed to be twenty or thirty people, and they’d just left the road and walked onto the vast lawn surrounding Olympias’s palace.

“I don’t know,” Sera responded, “but they don’t . . .” Her voice trailed off and she stopped walking.

So did Riq. “What?” he asked. But the word had barely left his mouth when he saw *exactly* what. Behind the others coming toward them — at a brisk pace, body language screaming that they weren’t on a nice, casual stroll — a woman strode along, mostly hidden from view because she was shorter than the others. But every once in a while Riq caught a glimpse of flaming red hair.

“Wait!” Dak called out to Alexander and the guards. Aristotle and Olympias had already stopped. “Tilda’s up there!”

Alex turned around, not a trace of sweat or deep breathing to show that he’d practically been running down the lawn. He looked at his teacher. “That’s the woman you came to warn me about?” Then his eyes moved to his mom. “That’s your new friend from the market?”

Both of them simply nodded.

Alexander pulled the sword from its sheath and his two guards followed his lead; the scrape of metal sliding against hard leather rang through the air like birdsong.

“And your friend needed an escort of twenty soldiers to come say hello?” Alex asked.

Riq was watching the oncoming crowd, and the heir to the hegemon was right. Those marching toward them, protecting Tilda in a semicircle as they walked, were dressed and armed just like Alex and his guards. The glint of breastplates and helms and drawn daggers, swords, and spears sparkled in the sunlight, some of the flashes almost blinding.

Olympias had gone totally pale, every bit of her seeming like she'd aged ten years in a minute, her eyes hard with worry. “I don't understand. I . . . things have gotten so complicated.”

*It doesn't matter*, Riq thought. They were here, and Riq and his friends were ridiculously outnumbered. The front line of soldiers stopped about thirty feet from where Alexander stood, but Tilda kept walking until she slipped past the armed men and finally stood where Riq could see her head to toe.

Below that fiery hair, her black lips made the rest of her skin look ghostly white. She wore tight-fitting clothes, bloodred and charcoal gray, that looked totally out of place compared to everyone else. Her face bore no expression whatsoever. In her right hand, she gripped an infinity-shaped device made out of gleaming metal.

The Eternity Ring.

“Hello, Olympias,” Tilda said, her voice so soft and smooth that it almost convinced Riq she was genuine. For a split second, he felt the outrageous urge to hear her out. There was something magnetic about her, like the woman had evil spells to hypnotize and manipulate whomever she wanted. “It's good to see you again so soon. Thanks again for the invitation to visit your beautiful home. I can tell it's quite the keeper.”

“You always bring along a bunch of hired thugs for friendly get-togethers?” Riq asked, his heart rate ticking up. He was surprised that Tilda appeared to have a translation device as advanced as that of the Hystorians. The SQ probably stole *that* technology from them, too.

Tilda was shaking her head, taking looks back at the soldiers she'd brought with her. “I'm done taking chances, as you can see. This isn't the first

time I've come back in time to do the job that the SQ *needs* to be done." She faltered a bit on the last couple of words — almost slurring them — and took a step to the left as if she'd suddenly lost her balance. "I hired every sword I could find in the city, and came to meet you here, exactly where I knew you would be."

She pointed somewhere over Riq's shoulder, and he turned to look. About fifty feet away, a woman was standing beside a tree, staring at them. Impossibly, it was Tilda — another version of Tilda, holding the Eternity Ring. A couple of seconds later, she activated the device and warped away in a blur of light and sound. Everyone gasped in surprise.

Riq spun around and shouted at the Tilda who was still there. "Are you crazy?"

"You can't mess with time like that!" Sera added. "No wonder you can barely stand. Jumping around with the Ring like that is going to fry your brain — not to mention do who-knows-what to reality itself!"

Dak was still staring back at the spot where the other Tilda had disappeared. Aristotle, Olympias, Alexander — even Tilda's own allies — just stood there, wondering what in the heck was going on.

Tilda stumbled again, but then moved a few steps forward as if she'd meant to do it. "Say what you want. Pretend to have all the high and mighty ideals you want. But I'm telling you, the Hystorians *do not* understand what's at stake. We can all fight here, and lose a lot of lives in the process. But if you would just *listen* to me . . ." Her face scrunched up in genuine frustration, and Riq found a small part of himself wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt again.

"I don't know you," Aristotle said, his voice deeper and holding more resonance than Riq had heard in him yet. "And I don't know the smallest part of what lies in the future or the extent of this battle between your . . . SQ and the Hystorians. But I do know that talking things through — trying to come to an understanding, might be our wisest course of action for right now."

*Maybe because we're outnumbered three to one,* Riq thought darkly.

Tilda took a few steps forward, and her focus was on Dak, Sera, and Riq, not the others in the group. “I know you think we’ve done bad things. Horrible things. But I’m telling you, we’re not idiots. We’re not *evil*. In fact, I know something that you don’t — that *none* of the Hystorians know.”

“And what’s that?” Riq asked.

Tilda answered quietly, her face a mask of stone. “How to stop the Cataclysm.”



## Council of Friends

SERA FELT a tingle in her temples, as if there were static electricity prickling her skin. She had encountered Tilda before, and it was never a pleasant experience. But this time felt different. Tilda herself *seemed* different. Desperate. Sera couldn't shake the feeling that the woman was more dangerous than ever.

“You have no idea how to stop the Cataclysm,” Dak said. “The SQ boneheads are the ones who've been trying to make sure it happens!” The volume of his voice had risen with every word.

Tilda laughed as if she'd heard something horrible, not funny. When she did, she also winced like something hurt. Sera understood. Too much warping through time and your body started to feel like it had been stretched on a medieval torture device.

“Make sure it happens?” the woman said after she recovered. “You kids are supposed to be smart. You have to be, or the Hystorians would never have let you go back in time to fix their so-called Great Breaks.” She paused, taking a second to look all three of them in the eyes. Alexander and everyone

else seemed content to observe for the moment. “You are intelligent, right? Or am I wrong?”

“Of course we’re smart,” Sera snapped. “What’s your point?”

Tilda held up a finger. “This. This is my point. Why on earth would we spend our entire effort — sacrificing lives and time and immense amounts of money — to run an organization that wants the world to end? What would be the point? If we want to rule humanity, don’t you think we’d want there to be a place for them to *live*? It’s insane to think we want the Cataclysm to happen. It’s outrageous and most definitely *not* intelligent.”

Sera wanted to say something, rebuke her somehow. But any potential words froze on her tongue. As much as she hated to admit it, the woman had made a good point.

Tilda seemed to sense a victory in their silence. “Our ways have been tough, I’ll be the first to admit it. We’ve been harsh because we have to be. Yes, we’ve ruled with an iron fist, and we’ve done everything in our power to make sure this man” — she tipped her head toward Aristotle — “didn’t fulfill his plan to mess up the world. To drive it toward the very Cataclysm that you think you’re preventing.”

She paused, and pinched the bridge of her nose as she took a deep breath. “Time and space are fine. The fabric of reality is fine. What you’re doing — messing with the past, trying to change major events — that’s the thing that will drive us to destruction. This young man . . .” Tilda paused and turned a sad gaze on Alexander. “He dies. He *must* die, for the good of the world. Whether by Pausanius’s hand or my own. I’m here to convince you to let that happen. With words, if possible. If not . . .”

She didn’t need to say the rest. Sera swallowed, feeling uncertain about their mission for the first time. Aristotle was the founder of the whole order of Hystorians — but was it possible that he’d created the organization for selfish reasons? That he simply couldn’t bear to see his favorite student killed? That it wasn’t about the fabric of time, but about a softhearted man who wanted to save a boy who could have been great? Sera hated it, hated this wave of doubt. “But why all the natural disasters?” she asked Tilda. “You’ve seen the

state of the world. Plus, I went to the future and I saw the Cataclysm for myself. In a world that the SQ has been running, by the way.”

“Exactly,” the woman replied. “You saw it. You went to the future *after* correcting some of the Hystorians’ so-called Breaks. You saw a catastrophic future that *you* created. Again, you’re smart. Think about these things, and you’ll see that I’m right.”

Aristotle turned away from Tilda and walked to stand with Sera and her friends. Alexander, his guards, and Olympias did as well. They stood in a circle, their job now to decide the fate of the entire world. Maybe the universe. *No biggie*, Sera thought.

“I don’t trust this woman,” Alexander said. He still held his sword as if he wanted to strike the first person to disagree with him.

“Amen,” Dak added. “I don’t trust that lady any farther than Riq can throw Sera.”

Riq’s face wrinkled up in confusion for a second, but then he just shrugged. “She’s a trickster. Whatever she says we should do, I’m doing the opposite.”

Sera looked at Olympias, but the woman was silent, deep in thought.

Aristotle scratched his long beard and sighed heavily. Then he spoke.

“This woman believes what she’s saying. Of that, I have no doubt. But there’s also a . . . darkness about her. Not to mention the simple fact that she marched twenty armed men down here to kill the boy I spent years training to be a great king someday. And I feel the goodness in each of you.” He stepped forward and took a second to touch Dak, Sera, then Riq on the shoulder.

“I don’t even see a question, to be honest,” the philosopher said. “There’s no way in Hades or the halls of Zeus that I’ll let that woman take the life of Alexander.”

“He is the *son* of Zeus,” Olympias whispered distantly.

“I don’t need your help,” the young heir said, his eyes slightly moist. “But I appreciate the offer.”

Fear crawled like a caterpillar up Sera’s spine. They only had three soldiers, and Tilda had twenty.



“What are you thinking?” Dak whispered to her.

She shrugged. “I just don’t know what we’re going to do.”

Dak turned to Alexander. “Can you call more of your friends? It looks like we have pretty bad odds.”

Alex spun the sword in his hand. “Today you will learn the greatness of Alexander” was all he said, but it came out sounding like something that should be engraved on a plaque. The young man turned toward Tilda and stepped away from the circle of friends they’d formed, heading straight toward the woman.

“My lady!” he yelled out. “We have counseled with my teacher and master, the wisest man who has ever graced this world. And our decision was an easy one. We reject your foul proposal and order you to leave the lands of my mother, Olympias of Epirus, daughter of King Neoptolemus. Leave, or the punishment will be severe.”

“So be it.” Tilda nodded, then took slow and steady steps backward, her eyes never leaving Alexander. The soldiers she’d hired parted to let her pass, and soon all of them were once again in front of her, a shield of armed and angry men.

“Kill them,” she said, as calmly as the most seasoned battle commander.

“But, Tilda!” Olympias screamed, finally coming alive. “You were my friend! We were like sisters!”

Tilda frowned. “Be sure and kill her, too.”



## A Dance on the Grass

ANY EMPATHY or understanding Riq had felt for Tilda vanished as quickly as a drop of water thrown into a fire. He almost sensed it leave his mind, like a tangible thing. The woman had been doing her best to brainwash them, but the spell was finally broken.

The soldiers she'd brought along started marching forward, drawing swords and daggers and spears. Their walk turned into a trot, then a run. Roaring battle yells, they charged in to do as their master had ordered.

A cold rush of terror washed through Riq, knowing they had absolutely no chance of fighting against all those muscles and weapons. Unless somehow they could wrestle a couple of the soldiers down, maybe steal their weapons .

..

He looked at Sera, and his heart hurt to see how scared she was. Dak, too. It was up to him, then. He would gladly sacrifice himself to ensure all they'd fought for wasn't lost now, with victory so close.

He took a step forward, but Sera grabbed his arm. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

“Hold,” Alexander suddenly said. Riq had been focused on Tilda’s group, but now he saw that Alex and his two guards had formed a line, swords drawn, their bodies rigid in a fighting stance.

“Hold,” the future king repeated, louder because the small army of soldiers was almost on them, screaming and yelling and clanging their weapons, feet pounding the ground like horses’ hooves.

“Hold!” Alex shouted again, a thundercrack of sound that overwhelmed everything else. The charging army was only fifteen feet away. “NOW!”

Riq actually jumped at the boom of the last word, its echo bouncing off the shields of the soldiers as if they were cliff walls. And then he witnessed a flurry of movement and speed that he hadn’t known possible.

Alex and his guards swept forward in a burst, their swords swinging through the air as if powered by great machines, cutting and slashing. Their free hands held daggers, which jabbed and stabbed in unsuspected places, felling their foes as surely as the huge blades. One by one, Tilda’s soldiers fell to the ground, writhing in agony, bleeding, screaming. Alexander in particular was like a tornado of human flesh, his movements a blur, his feet dancing, his sword flashing in the sun as it cut down one man after another.

Riq watched, stunned, caught between surprise and wanting to jump up and down to cheer their hero. Dak had no reservations. He was cheering, pumping his fists as he did so.

Olympias had a huge smile on her face, beaming with pride. She turned to the others and spoke over the sounds of clashing battle. “He’s the greatest soldier to ever live. Someday he’ll make a great king. I’ve given my whole life to making sure that happens.”

That last part gave Riq the chills because he knew exactly what she had up her sleeve to ensure Alexander became the hegemon sooner than later.

“Guys, look!” Sera shouted, pointing beyond where Alexander and his two buddies were slowly but surely winning their small war.

Riq did as she said, and saw Tilda running. She had the Eternity Ring gripped in her hands and was sprinting all out for a thicker grouping of trees on the edge of the huge lawn.

“Not this time,” Riq said, mostly to himself, already on the run to skirt around the soldiers and pursue Tilda. He was *not* going to let her get away. “Come on! Before she warps again.” He was surprised she hadn’t preprogrammed the thing already, just in case. It showed how overly confident she’d been that victory was in hand.

Dak and Sera stayed on his heels — he could hear them breathing but he didn’t dare take the time to look. Riq watched his step and watched Tilda, taking as direct a course as possible without risking a sword chopping off his head.

Tilda reached the trees and disappeared behind a huge oak, just as Riq cleared the last soldier and started sprinting across the expanse of grass. He sucked in each breath and spit it back out, his chest heaving with exertion. It had been a while since he’d run so hard. They were so close to victory. So *close*. And he just knew that if Tilda got away again, she could ruin everything.

“Hurry!” Dak yelled from behind him.

“What do you think I’m doing?!” Riq shouted right back, though he could barely get the words out.

He reached the trees and didn’t slow, bursting into the relative darkness of the shade. Whipping his head back and forth, he searched for where she’d gone, terrified that she’d already whisked away into a wormhole. Riq finally slowed, knowing he couldn’t risk passing her by, and Dak ran into him, knocking both of them to the ground. Riq grunted and struggled to get back to his feet, pushing Dak off of him.

“Over there!” Sera yelled, pointing.

Riq didn’t pause to ask questions, pushing off the ground and exploding in that direction like a runner off the blocks. He rounded a tree and saw her, kneeling on the ground, furiously working at the controls of her Eternity Ring. Riq ran, going faster than he’d ever thought possible. Tilda looked up at him, her face fraught with worry, tensed and tightly pulled over her skull. He saw her hand moving toward the final button, the one that would take her away.

“NO!” he screamed, diving into the air.

His shoulders slammed into Tilda’s body, knocking the Ring out of her hands. Out of the corner of his eye he saw it land and bounce, finally coming to a rest in a big pile of leaves. He and Tilda rolled, one on top of the other, about three times before they, too, came to a stop.

“Get off of me!” she yelled. “Get *off* !”

Surprisingly strong, she was able to push him away. Riq quickly got to his feet to run after the Eternity Ring, but Sera had already snatched it up in her hands. She held it close to her body, cradling it with both arms. Dak stood next to her, and both of them looked like they’d been underwater for five minutes by the way they were breathing so heavily.

Riq turned to Tilda again just in time for her to slap him across the face. It stung, made him stumble backward.

“How dare you!” she screamed at him, her eyes burning with hatred. “You brats have no idea what you’re doing! No idea! If you had half the vision that my people and I do, you’d grab a dagger right now and go stab Alexander in the heart!”

Riq didn’t respond. Neither did Dak or Sera. They stared at the woman, seeing the insanity that barely kept itself hidden beneath her exterior. She was cracking, cracking for good. Riq knew without the slightest doubt that Tilda could never be trusted with the Eternity Ring.

“Give it back to me,” she said in an almost scary, calm voice to Sera. “Hand it over, nice and easy, and I promise the SQ will leave your parents alone.”

Sera let out a little gasp, and Riq knew the woman’s words had hurt his friend. And just like that, he hated Tilda a little bit more. And made his decision.

Walking up to Sera, he held out his hand. “I know what to do.”

She hesitated a second, and Riq could see the doubt in her eyes. Tilda had almost gotten to her. But she came to her senses, giving him a grim nod and handing over the device. He felt its cool, smooth surface, could sense the outrageous amount of power contained within its infinity-shaped shell.

Turning back to Tilda, he said, “You could’ve done so much good for the world.”

Then he gripped one end of the device, reached back, and slammed it into the trunk of the closest tree.

“STOP!” screamed Tilda. “*STOP!*”

But Riq didn’t stop. He hit the tree with it again. And again. And again. With all his strength, throwing his hatred for the woman into every single strike, he pummeled the trunk over and over, until he heard a crack, then a bigger crack, then a metallic splintering, followed by more cracks.

Finally, on one last heave, the Eternity Ring exploded into a mess of broken fragments, falling to the ground in a rain of sharp debris. All the while, Tilda wailed like a lost child.



## Just Walk Away

DAK HAD mixed feelings as he watched Riq go crazy-town with the Eternity Ring, smashing the thing into tiny bits. On the one hand, he relished the painful cries coming from Tilda — the woman deserved what she was getting — but on the other hand, destroying such a valuable piece of technology might not be the smartest thing his friend had ever done. But in terms of showmanship, the guy got an A-plus.

When Riq was finally done, letting the last little piece of metal shard drop from his hand, he took a step backward and stared along with the rest of them at the ruins of the Ring. Tilda's haunted screams had faded into more of a hitching series of sobs. Dak almost felt sorry for her, but then remembered what a master of manipulation she'd proven to be.

Riq looked a little embarrassed for what he'd done, but Dak wanted to high-five him, though that seemed slightly inappropriate for the moment. Instead, he walked over and lightly patted him on the back.

"You did the right thing," he whispered. "She brought it on herself."

Sera was right next to them, and agreed. “Let’s go back. She can’t hurt anybody anymore. The Eternity Ring’s destroyed and she probably spent every last penny hiring all those soldiers. Come on.”

Riq eyed Tilda, who seemed to be in total shock, still staring at the smashed parts of the Ring as she cried. “How can we just leave her? Who knows what kind of trouble she can stir up? She’s *Tilda*, man.”

“What’re we going to do?” Sera replied. “Kill her? Throw her in jail?”

“Maybe in the opposite order,” Dak said, hoping a laugh could relax everybody a bit. But instead he got two cold looks in response. “I don’t know. Aristotle can figure out what to do with her.”

“You’re right,” Sera said. “It’s not really our place. We’ve done enough damage making sure she’s stuck here forever. Let’s go back and check on Alexander.”

Riq muttered something that Dak couldn’t hear, then stormed off through the trees in the direction of the lawn. Sera followed, and Dak had taken one step when he heard Tilda say something from behind him.

“You’ll regret this,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Oh, please,” he responded. “Leave it alone, Tilda. Aren’t things bad enough?”

She didn’t respond. She only turned from him and walked away.



Quite the sight awaited Dak when he caught up with Sera and Riq. Every last soldier that had come at Tilda’s command to kill Alexander either lay on the ground with nasty wounds, some of them dead and unmoving, or knelt on the ground, their hands tied behind their backs. Swords and daggers and clubs, smeared with blood, littered the green canvas of the lawn.

Alexander stood by Aristotle, surveying the scene, while Olympias was gone, maybe to call help to clean up, arrest people, whatever needed to be done.

The philosopher seemed quite relieved to see that Dak and the others had survived their own little mission — the relief on the man’s face made Dak



feel happy from top to bottom.

“Do you think we’ve done it?” Aristotle asked them after congratulations and explanations were done. “Have we saved Alexander, prevented the Prime Break you told me about?”

Dak was at a loss for words. The man seemed to think they had all the answers, and he guessed it made sense since they were from the future and all. But he was the dude who started the Hystorians. Deep down, Dak was hoping the guy would tell them “You’ve done it! All is right in the world! The Cataclysm is no more! Let’s party!” Instead he was asking *them* for reassurance.

After an awkward silence, Sera finally answered. “Honestly, I don’t think we know. Things haven’t happened like we expected. I mean, we were *supposed* to save Alexander from a guy named Pausanius, out in the army camps of his dad.”

“*Pausanius?*” Alexander repeated, his tone harsh. He’d been cleaning his sword, but he was now all ears, his body rigid with attention. “The nobleman? The man who’s been serving as one of my father’s bodyguards?”

Sera stammered to answer, but nothing coherent came out. Dak took over since he was the one who knew the history the best.

“That’s him,” he said. “I know it can’t be good to hear, but your mom hired that guy to kill King Philip so that you could become the king sooner rather than later. She didn’t want him to kill you, of course, but you showed up and . . . Well, you know how things go sometimes. Bada-boom bada-bing, and you died, too.”

Riq gave him a sharp look. “Seriously? What a way with words you have.”

“I’m just telling him how it is. Or was. Or whatever.” He faced Alexander again, whose face had grown about five shades of red darker. “But then Tilda started jumping around time and changed everything up. We had to come back here and save you, and now that you know what’s going on, you’ll be safe, right?” He hated to think Riq was right, but Dak didn’t feel like a single word popping out of his mouth had made a lick of sense.

Alexander didn't look well. He stared at the ground, his eyes afire, his face growing even redder. And his chest heaved with breaths.

"Alex?" Aristotle asked. "What's wrong? We've made things right, and there's still plenty of time to stop your mother from her ill-fated plan. Just let me handle her, okay?"

But Alexander wasn't listening. He backed away, still not looking anybody in the eye, shaking his head, fuming with anger. Olympias appeared then, with a host of servants and guards to start the clean-up process. When Alexander saw her, he went ballistic.

"How could you?" he screamed, the words ragged as they tore from his throat. "How could you do this thing?" And then he was running toward the stables, not listening to anyone who tried to get him to come back.

Dak looked at his friends, then back at Aristotle. Everyone seemed frozen to the ground, stunned, unsure of what to do. Olympias marched toward them, pulling up in front of the philosopher, furious.

"Why?" she spat at him. "Why are you meddling so much? *I* know what's best for my son and his future. Only me! I want you to leave here at once!"

The philosopher was unfazed. "You have to stop this nonsense, Olympias. Let matters follow their own course now."

"Philip will die!" she yelled, not a trace of her dazzling self left from when Dak had first met her. She shook, and her skin was an unnatural color of rage. "My son must be the hegemon and lead the world to glory!"

Before Aristotle could reply, a horse came leaping from the stables, breaking into a gallop that tore up the grass of the lawn. Alexander was on top, reins in hands, leaning forward.

"Alex!" Aristotle yelled. "What are you doing on Bucephalus?"

*Bucephalus*, Dak thought. *What a weird name for a horse.*

The heir to the king didn't slow, certainly didn't stop. But Dak heard him answer as animal and rider flew past them.

"I'm going to save the king."

Dak's insides melted. That's how the whole mess happened in the first place. It appeared the Prime Break was still in play after all.



## The Crumpled Scroll

IN THE next few minutes there was a lot of yelling. A lot of arguing. Also a lot of standing around looking at one another with blank faces. Riq watched it all in silence.

Aristotle scolded Olympias. She scolded him right back. Dak and Sera tried to convince a whole host of different people to get on horses and chase Alexander down, force him to come back before he got himself killed just the way the original history played out. No one seemed too keen on that idea. It was like telling a zebra to go talk a pride of lions away from fresh meat.

As for Riq, he was lost on the inside. It had felt so good to lose himself to his anger. Now that it was gone, he felt empty. The truth was that he liked having an enemy to focus on. Tilda had been the source of so much fear and fury and anxiety in his life. And now she was defeated, pathetic, and Riq was left with fears that weren't so easy to punch or kick or bite.

He rubbed his hands together, wiping away the last droplets of fuel from the Eternity Ring.

Suddenly Sera was standing before him. She touched his elbow and spoke low, out of earshot of Dak. “Riq, what was that all about back there?”

Riq grimaced. “Sorry,” he said. “I guess I overdid it a little.”

Sera shook her head. “Tilda had that coming to her, and worse. I mean before. You were ready to jump right into the fight with twenty heavily armed men.”

“Sera,” he began. Then he paused, searching for the words. “You know this is it for me. I can’t risk going back to the future when we’re done here. The mission —”

“The mission is important,” Sera cut in. “But so are you.” She gave him a look that was somehow friendly and dangerous at the same time. “Ever since 1850, you’ve been way too willing to sacrifice yourself for the mission. You’ve thrown yourself in front of swords, spears, and bombs. It’s got to stop, Riq. Even if you really can’t come back to the future, that doesn’t mean you can’t have a future of your own.”

Riq blinked mutely, unsure what to say to that. Had he really been that careless? Had he been acting like a hero or a lunatic with a death wish?

“You two want to join us?” Dak hollered. “We need to make a decision.”

“Well, you won’t do it in my home,” Olympias announced. She’d recovered some of her earlier hauteur, and once again looked like a princess. “Aristotle, you’ve done great things for my family, but you were also paid in kind. You’re no longer welcome here.” She raised a hand when he started to protest. “No. Please. Enough quarrels for one day. Please respect my wishes and leave. Immediately.”

“Respect?” Dak blurted. “You wanna talk about respect? Not only are you planning on killing the king, you know now that it could very well mean your kid dies, too. And you’re not going to do anything? What kind of person are you anyway?”

Sera touched Dak on the arm, her eyes down. Riq felt for him, but he also knew there was nothing they could do to change things through Olympias.

“Hey,” Riq said to his friend. “Dude. Just let it go. Come on.”

“Yes,” Aristotle agreed. “It’s plain that dealing with this woman can no longer lead to solutions. Dak. Sera. Riq. Let’s go and gather our thoughts in a place more welcoming than here.”

They started to walk off, and Olympias called out some parting words.

“Never come back.”



They found a little alcove in an abandoned warehouse, where the smell of fish and salt and rotting meat mixed with the scent of flowers that covered the grounds nearby. It all combined into something that wasn’t altogether unpleasant, and for some reason it made Sera’s stomach rumble with hunger. They sat on old benches of stone — cracked and dirty — and tried to figure out what they should do next.

“Look on the bright side,” Dak said. “We’re no worse off than before. Actually, we’re better off in some ways. We still have to stop this Pausanius dude from killing Alexander, which was right where we started. But at least we know that Tilda is out of the picture. Right?”

Sera didn’t think that was much to get excited about. “Yeah, I guess. But now Olympias can warn her man, make sure he’s more careful.”

“But,” Riq said, “that might be good, too. She obviously doesn’t really want to kill her son. Maybe she’ll drive that through the guy’s head: *Don’t kill Alexander, no matter what.*”

Aristotle was shaking his head. “All excellent points, but I fear you’re missing the most important. Whether or not Pausanius means him any harm, Alexander is now out for the man’s blood. If Alexander defends his father, or avenges him, Pausanius will fight back to protect his own life.”

Dak scoffed at that. “Did you see the way he mowed down all those soldiers out there? Unless this Pausanius guy is Hercules or something, I think old boy Alex will be just fine.”

“Except he wasn’t.” Sera didn’t mean to be flippant, but it was the sad truth that Pausanius had killed Alexander, no matter how great a fighter the

heir to Philip might have been. “He died, and there’s nothing to say it won’t happen just like it did in our history books.”

Dak opened his mouth for a retort, but then left it hanging there. She was right, and he knew it.

“So, what do we do?” Riq asked.

Aristotle gave the answer. “It’s quite simple, really. We use your time device to jump ahead a few days to the future, traveling to the camps of King Philip. Once there, we do everything in our power to keep Pausanius away from the hegemon and his son. I still have a lot of sway, I believe.”

Sera liked to hear him sound so confident. “Perfect. That’s about the best plan we can hope for. I just hope they believe us.”

Before anyone could respond to her, a soldier appeared from around the corner, collapsing in a heap right in front of their benches. He was ragged and bruised and bloody, gasping for each and every breath as if his lungs had been punctured. Sera recognized him as one of Tilda’s men. She jumped up in fear but then realized just how weak the man was, not a threat at all. Everyone else had stood up as well.

“Aris . . . totle,” the man wheezed.

The philosopher knelt down by the man, though keeping his distance in case it was a trap. “Yes. What is it?”

“You . . . spared . . . my life.” The man’s face pinched up in pain, and he took several long, struggling breaths. “I want to . . . repay you.” He reached out and opened his hand, where a scroll had been clutched between his fingers.

Aristotle stood up, took the scroll, unrolled it, then read through it quickly. When he was finished, he looked right at Dak.

“When you told me your story, you mentioned something about your parents possibly being in this time period, correct?”

Dak nodded uncertainly. “Yeah, what’s going on?”

“They have the name Smyth, just like yours?”

“Yes!”

The philosopher's face creased in concern. "An unusual name for these parts, so I can't imagine it to be a coincidence."

This time it was Sera's turn to yell in frustration, Aristotle or not. "Tell us!"

The man complied. "It looks like your Tilda gave us one last blow. If I understand correctly, Dak, your parents have been sent to the front line of King Philip's upcoming battle." He slowly shook his head back and forth, even sadder than before. "A place where almost no one survives, I'm afraid."



## Aristotle's Word

A BOMB had just exploded inside Dak's mind, and he didn't quite know how to deal with it. He heard the greatest and the worst news ever in a single statement from Aristotle. His parents were evidently alive and well, in the same time period as him. And yet they were sent off to a war that would probably kill them.

"Wait . . . um . . . what?" he said, sure he sounded even more ridiculous than he felt.

The great philosopher looked at him with compassion and tenderness, and had him sit back down.

"Listen to me," Aristotle said. "If this is true, then I give you my word that we'll do everything in our power to save them. As surely as we'll save Alexander and his father. Understand?"

Dak nodded. His chest hurt from the stress and worry. But he stayed quiet and waited for the full explanation. Aristotle continued.

"This is a magistrate's report from the office of the hegemon." He held up the scroll and shook it like a flag. "Two people of foreign descent were turned



into authorities by a woman and her soldiers. The woman's name is listed as Tilda, and the . . . slaves as the Smyths. Yes, slaves. Now, hear me out."

Dak's eyes had swollen to the size of grapefruits, but he stayed silent.

"Tilda accused them of being runaways and having poisoned their master, a thing I'm most certain that the woman did herself. That's probably how she obtained these soldiers in the first place" — he gave a weary look to the unconscious man on the ground — "by killing their master and . . . *freeing* them to work for her. She's a devious and clever woman."

"But what does that have to do with the front line of some battle?" Sera asked. Dak was too choked up to ask it himself.

"The report has their plea and the resolution," Aristotle answered. "At first they were imprisoned and sentenced to death by poison hemlock — the very fate that befell the great Socrates. In exchange for their lives, they were given duty on the front line of the upcoming war against Persia. Hardly a good trade, but better than outright death, I suppose. Hopefully we can get to them in time. I know King Philip will understand and pull them back. I give you my word, Dak. On Plato's grave, my word."

Dak looked up at the man, his long beard, his salt-and-pepper hair and eyebrows, his wrinkled skin, his wide shoulders, those eyes that said he knew everything worth knowing. Dak understood why Aristotle would go down in history as one of the great thinkers of all the humans who'd ever walked the earth. There was just something . . . majestic about him.

Dak realized something else then, too. It was one thing to be intelligent — to spout facts and figures and generally act like a know-it-all. It was another thing entirely to be wise. And Dak wanted to be more than just smart.

"Dak?" Sera asked. "Are you okay?"

He broke his gaze from the philosopher and turned it toward his best friend. Sera meant everything to him, as much as his parents. Seeing her, still by his side despite everything, and hearing Aristotle's words of wisdom — it all did something to lift his heart. It was going to be okay. Everything. A-okay.

“I’m all right,” he finally said, his spirits lifting by the second. “We’re close, guys. We’re so dang close to wrapping this whole business up. Let’s get to King Philip’s camp, let’s tell him about that Pausanias dude, get my parents back, and warp ourselves back to the nice cozy future we’ve almost finished creating. Who’s in?”

The smile that broke across Sera’s face was more full of relief than anything else, but she put her hand out like a quarterback in a football huddle. Dak put his on top of hers.

Riq rolled his eyes and said, “No way. But I’m in.”

Dak gave Riq a dramatic glare. “Don’t leave us hanging, dude.”

With a sigh, Riq laid his hand on top of theirs, and the three friends gave a small cheer.

Aristotle seemed baffled by their hand gesture, but his expression showed a trace of excitement. “Let’s find some help for our poor soldier here.” The man’s breathing was shallow, but steady. “Then we rest, eat, and make preparations. When we’re ready, we’ll use your magical device to go exactly where we need to go.”



Two days later, Sera stood with her friends — and the philosopher, of course — on a rise that stood above a huge sweeping valley that seemed to stretch beyond the horizon. It was like a city with no permanent buildings: Tents filled it from one side to the other. Cookfires, temporary pens for animals, and storage sheds for food and weapons dotted the scene, and men and women streamed through the valley.

“I certainly never thought I’d come to this area,” Aristotle said, almost reverently. Sera thought she heard a hint of fear in there somewhere, too. “I’ve been receiving reports about the hegemon and his growing army for some time now. But to see it firsthand . . . it takes the breath away. I don’t like to think about what all those soldiers will do when they march across the continent.”

“We’re not here to judge,” Sera said. She’d struggled plenty with her conscience in the course of fixing the Breaks. She still wondered whether she could have done more for the people she’d met. But the consequences of meddling with history boggled her mind. In the end, all she could do was take the Hystorians at their word, set history on what they claimed was the proper path, and hope for the best.

“No judgment, here,” the philosopher replied after a few moments of considering her answer. “I’m just in awe of the power of an army, and I don’t like thinking about what happens during the horrors of war and conquest.”

“I used to,” Dak said quietly. Sera expected him to say more, but he didn’t.

Riq turned his back on the sight and faced his companions. “Let’s just get the job done. We’ve come this far and we’ve done what we were supposed to do. Let’s finish it. Nothing could be worse than the Cataclysm.”

Aristotle made a harrumphing sound.

“What’s our plan of action?” Sera asked her friends. “What do we do first?”

“Oh,” Aristotle replied, “I suspect that we don’t have to do much of anything.”

“What do you mean?” Sera replied.

The man gestured with a nod of the head toward the camp below them. “You’ll see soon enough. Our hegemon didn’t get to where he is today by letting strangers just appear at his camps without explaining themselves. Thoroughly. Watch and see.”

They all turned to face the valley again, and it wasn’t more than a minute later that a group of horses came galloping out of the mass of soldiers and up the dry, grassy hill, their hooves kicking up dust in a cloud.

One of the animals broke away from the rest of the crowd and charged in, the man atop its back dressed in light armor, his golden helm hiding most of his face. But the eyes and mouth made Sera think the guy wasn’t a very happy person. He looked as if he’d run right over them, but he pulled up his horse at

the last second, making it rear back on its two hind legs. Then it settled with a loud neigh and the man spoke in a gruff voice.

“You’ve crossed onto forbidden ground. Down on your knees. Now!”

Aristotle obviously intended on taking no such treatment. “Listen to me, young man. We are here to speak to the hegemon. My name is —”

“I don’t care what your name is, old man!” He pulled out a short whip and slashed it through the air, striking the philosopher across the face. Aristotle yelled out in pain, crumpling to the ground.

“Hey!” Sera screamed. “Do you have any idea who that is?”

The man raised the whip again, and Dak and Riq both jumped in front of her, staring up at the fierce soldier. Sera didn’t know if she’d ever seen them do something quite that brave.

The man lowered his arm, but spat, his saliva splashing on all of them. Then he turned to the others who’d come with him. “Tie them up. Gag them. Throw them in the pit. Tomorrow, they hang.”

Then he rode off, leaving his minions to do the dirty work.



## Gagged and Dragged

EVERYTHING THE jerk of a soldier had said became true, one detail at a time. Dak just hoped that the final order — being hanged — somehow got lost in a loophole. But so far he hadn't seen any nice genius lawyers in fancy suits walking around.

They had an awful, awful couple of hours after the original soldier disappeared back into the army's camp. His men dragged Dak and his friends around and stuffed big wads of cloth in their mouths, making it hard to breathe, much less talk. They tied ropes to their bound wrists, then pulled them along behind their horses. Dak stumbled, fell, got dragged, scrambled to his feet, then stumbled and started the whole process all over again. His friends didn't fare much better. And Aristotle . . .

Seeing what the kind, dignified man went through just about shattered Dak's heart. They gave him no better treatment, no mercy, no respect. He'd yelled his name successfully a couple of times before the soldiers finally gagged him, and all four of them had moaned and groaned and screamed

muffled screams since then. But “Aristotle” and “We’re friends of Alexander” and “We need to save the king” and “I have to use the bathroom” all came out sounding like “*Mrrrrrph rmmm gurggggrle rrrrmph.*”

It was hopeless.

Tears stung Dak’s eyes as they dragged him over dry grass, dust and dirt, rocks and pebbles, roots and scattered old bones — which he hoped weren’t human. His whole body ached — and his insides felt even worse, watching his friends — by the time they came to a halt at the lip of a giant hole dug into the ground, a roughly rectangular pit in which dozens of people huddled in small groups. Dak saw their terrified eyes, constantly looking up, darting back and forth at the soldiers, probably wondering who’d be the one to finally end their lives.

Dak tried to scream, but it came out as another wimpy muffled moan. He tried to squirm away from the man holding his rope to no avail. He looked at each of his friends — at Sera, at Riq, at Aristotle — hoping that something magical might happen to free them. Desperation and fear boiled in their eyes, as he knew they did in his, too.

The soldiers dragged them to the very edge, then threw them into the pit one by one.



Riq hadn’t cried very often in his life. Not because he was some kind of macho hero dude or anything. He just wasn’t the type.

But something swelled behind his eyeballs, and it sure felt wet. Eventually, to his own surprise, tears trickled down his cheeks. He would’ve wiped them away if his hands had been free, but they were bound tightly with rope. So instead he buried his head into his lap as best he could, and cried a little harder.

He didn’t completely understand why the sorrow racked him so heavily now, of all times. They’d been through plenty of tough days as they’d traveled throughout history, fixing Break after Break. But these soldiers had seemed so harsh. So brutal. So *mean*. They didn’t discriminate their rough treatment —

old man, kids, girl, it didn't matter to them. Riq was positive that they treated their animals better, especially the horses.

He was so close, yet so far away from winning his war against the SQ. Stuck in a prison pit, ordered to die in the morning, with no way to tell anyone who they were or why they'd come. And even if they did get out of it, what did it matter? Riq had nowhere to go. Dak and Sera would have to leave him behind. Wasn't he better off dead?

And that was the kicker. That was the truth at the heart of the despair threatening to swallow him up. Sera had been right. He'd preferred the idea of a hero's death to trying to imagine life without family, friends, and the Hystorians' mission.

But he wanted to live. He knew that now. He didn't want to die in this place.

And so, he curled up into a ball as much as possible, and he let himself cry it all out, not caring who saw or heard.



Sera had enough bumps and bruises to last the rest of her life if she had any say in it. But she probably didn't have much say, and she had a feeling that more would be coming.

Aching and wincing, she'd scooted away from where she'd landed after being tossed into the pit, and finally nestled her back against the wall, finding the most comfortable position possible — considering her wrists were tied behind her back. The cloth stuffed inside her mouth was awful, choking her and making it hard to breathe. Several times she'd had to fight the urge to throw up from a gag reflex. She could only imagine how pleasant that would turn out.

Settling her body, she forced herself to relax. Something would work out, she knew it. They still had the Infinity Ring, a miracle in itself. Maybe the soldiers weren't planning on searching them for valuables until they came out of the pit. Or maybe they didn't care, or doubted they had any. Regardless, Sera and her friends had the Ring. And if she could just get her hands free . . .

She struggled a bit but stopped to catch her breath. She took a long look at each of her friends. Riq had curled up into a ball, and she thought his shoulders shook a little. Was he crying? For some reason that hurt worse than the bruises and scrapes. Dak lay on his side, staring at the dirt, breathing slowly and calmly. Aristotle was next to him, sitting up, staring at the edge of the pit as if he expected King Philip or Alexander to appear at any second to rescue them.

She loved these people, her friends, the philosopher . . . She wanted to do whatever it took to get them out, to get them back home. She wanted to win, fix the Prime Break, eliminate the SQ, stop the Cataclysm. She wanted it all so desperately.

And underneath it all, her parents. She could still picture them, as she'd seen them in her Remnants. She knew that whatever power Tilda had over them, they loved her. She just knew it. So if it had been the SQ who had taken her parents from her, then that was all the more reason to keep fighting until the SQ was wiped out of existence.

Dak. Riq. Aristotle. Her parents. Dak's parents. Her uncle. Brint. Mari. The countless others who would be saved if the mission succeeded.

Riq could cry — he deserved to let it all out. Dak could sit and think — he deserved a rest, a break, some time to himself. Aristotle could stare at the sky and hope as much as he wanted.

The rest was up to Sera.

She could do this.

*Would* do this.

No matter what.

Step by step, piece by piece.

She got to work.





## Tedious Work

THE GAG was the first thing to go.

She had to trust her eyes more than ever before in her life. Watching, waiting, watching, looking everywhere — she focused on the soldiers guarding the pit, and forced herself to rely on patience, taking the tiny opportunities when they came. Dak started to sit up when he noticed what she was doing, but she glared at him — they could say more with their eyes and body language than most people could with words — and he went back to lying on the dirty ground.

It took a while — and some serious bending of body parts that she hadn't bent so much since, well, 1850 or so — but she was finally able to reach her hand high enough to grab the wad of cloth in her mouth and pull it out. Choking and coughing, she spun around to face the wall of the pit so that no one could see her. Thirst raked her throat, and it seemed as if the coughs might never stop coming. But they subsided, and she composed herself once again.

She slowly turned around, puffing her cheeks out a bit so that it would look like she still had the gag. A quick survey of the scene up above showed that no guards suspected anything — in fact, they wandered around the pit as if they couldn't care less what anyone below did. But Sera couldn't take any chances.

Riq caught her eye. He'd uncurled from his position and sat staring at her, his face full of questions. That's when Sera made a huge decision. Escaping the pit would be hard enough for one person — impossible for four. Her friends needed to trust that she could find people who knew Aristotle and come back to get them. She hoped they understood. With careful nods of her head and pointing with her eyes, she tried to tell Riq and Dak that she wanted them to create a diversion.

In one corner of the pit, there were enough hand- and footholds in the dug-out dirt that she was certain she could climb up the wall and out. She'd climbed her share of trees throughout the years. Riq and Dak seemed to understand, and started moving to the opposite side of the pit, hands still tied up.

Which reminded Sera of her next task. The ropes binding her wrists didn't seem all that strong. And there were plenty of rocks strewn about the roughly dug prison into which they'd been thrown. She looked around until she found a good one with a sharp edge, then sat over it, head down, like a girl who'd given up on the world and only wanted to cry in pity. Then she started sawing. Back and forth, back and forth, glancing around every few seconds to make sure no soldier had noticed.

A strained, muffled series of sounds came from behind her, and she twisted around to see Aristotle looking directly at her, trying to say something. She shrugged to let him know she couldn't understand, and he stopped making the moaning noise. But then his face took on a calm, commanding presence — almost magical — that seemed to fill the air with some kind of unearthly communication. She felt it, and it encouraged her. He was telling her that he was proud, that he knew she could do this.

She went back to her task, working harder to cut the ropes.

“You there!” a man yelled from the lip of the pit.

Every cell in Sera’s body froze solid, and her heart dropped. Still crouching over the rock, she slowly looked up. A soldier stood on the very edge, his toes hanging over. He was pointing, but not at her. He was pointing at Dak and Riq, who bounced on their feet as if they thought they could jump right out of the pit.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the guard asked, a hint of cocky amusement in his voice. “Trying to get in some exercise so you’ll be nice and fit for the hanging tomorrow?” He bellowed a laugh that made Sera want to strangle him, and some of the other soldiers joined in. One picked up a rock and threw it at Dak, though it missed, kicking up a little puff of dirt where it landed.

Sera couldn’t help them, not now. Her best bet was to use the diversion.

She sawed, vigorously, biting her tongue between her lips with the effort. Finally, the rope snapped in two and the frayed fragments fell from her wrists. She quickly squatted over them and kept her hands behind her back, waiting to see if any alarms or shouts arose from the soldiers. But every last one of them continued to mock and throw things at Dak and Riq.

Sera was free. Loose. Too bad she was at the bottom of a huge pit with soldiers all around her.

She moved casually, making sure to avoid quick or jerky movements that might draw attention. Keeping to the lowest, farthest angle of the pit’s bottom, she crawled toward the corner, longing for the hand- and footholds like they were a thousand miles away. Dak and Riq had quite a crowd now, causing their diversion without even having to do much. She’d be sure to thank them for all the lumps and bruises they’d have from rocks raining down from above. Thankfully, the guards seemed like they only wanted to taunt them, not hurt or kill them. Most of the ammunition missed by a long shot.

She reached the corner. Freedom awaited ten feet above her. Every soldier she could see had made their way to the other half of the pit, watching the show. She saw Riq notice her, and his eyes said it all before he quickly looked

away. He knew she needed something a little more special to ensure no one looked her way.

Riq coiled his legs, then vaulted himself onto Dak, using his shoulders and knees to pummel her best friend. She didn't know if Dak understood what he was doing, but Dak fought back on instinct, and soon they were rolling and tussling comically as the soldiers — and, sadly, the other prisoners — roared with laughter, cheering for one or the other.

*Now*, Sera thought.

Giving up on any pretense of staying low or being tied with ropes anymore, Sera jumped to her feet and attacked the dirt wall, roughly hewn and filled with places to grab for holds. Some of it crumbled, making her slip several inches at a time, but things stayed solid for the most part. Like a monkey on a jungle gym, she clambered up and reached the top of the pit in no time.

Panting — more from anxiety than the effort of climbing — she didn't waste even a second looking around to see who might've seen her. She spotted a break in a long row of tents nearby, a little alley that led away from the main clearing, where hundreds of people milled about. She headed that direction, sprinting with all the strength left in her body.

She'd made it about halfway when she heard the clamor and yells of the soldiers guarding the pit. Their angry voices rose over the din of the crowd.

They'd spotted her.



## Two Bad Choices

DAK WONDERED if he'd ever have a day again where nothing on his body hurt and there weren't a million things on the planet stressing him out.

Today certainly wasn't it.

He'd already been tired and sore *before* crawling across the dirty floor of the pit with his hands tied. Then you added in the nice element of rocks raining down from the sky, a few of them lucky enough to smack him in the shoulders and back. To top it all off, Riq decided to go insane-wrestler-dude on him, jabbing with his elbows and knees in all kinds of places that didn't feel so hot. Dak had fought back, knowing that it was for Sera — but that didn't mean he had to like it.

And it had worked. He knew it. He'd seen her disappear over the lip of the pit, and she'd had plenty of a head start before the soldiers started yelling and chasing. He knew his friend, and he wouldn't even *allow* the thought of her getting caught to enter his mind. At least he had the pit as a measuring stick — as long as she wasn't hauled back and thrown in, he had to assume she was safe. Unless . . .

Again, he blocked off his mind from terrible possibilities.

Riq lay on his side, facing away from Dak. *The poor guy*, Dak thought. Something about him seemed to suggest he'd finally run out of steam. He reminded Dak of a balloon that held on for as long as it could after a birthday party, clinging to the ceiling, but then eventually sank to the floor, a wilted, crumpled heap of rubber. Dak felt it, too, but he still had hope. Once someone figured out they had Aristotle in their prison pit, surely all would be well in the world again.

The Let's-Throw-Rocks-at-Dak-and-Riq Show had ended as soon as a guard had spotted Sera running away, and most of the guards had left in pursuit. Several returned now, but Dak couldn't tell from their whispers or body language if she'd been captured. The fact that they didn't bring her back, of course, was a very good sign. Unless . . .

One of the soldiers lowered a wooden ladder into the pit, steadied it, then climbed down, followed by two others. Dak shifted around to fully face them, sitting on his rear end, feeling like a lassoed pig. The three guards were armed, and one of them actually had his sword in hand, using only the other as he descended. Though Dak held on to the hope that they had come down for some other purpose, it was quickly dashed. They headed straight for Riq.

Riq noticed them at the last second, jolting and squirming as he tried to get away from them. Useless effort, of course. They snatched him under the arms and hauled him to his feet, then dragged him to the closest wall of the pit, where they — very ungently — threw him back down into the dirt. He landed with a heavy thump and a grunt. Next, they came for Dak, who didn't resist when they did the same thing to him. A few seconds later, he was sitting next to Riq, his backside a little sorer than it had been.

Not surprisingly, Aristotle was their last target, picked up and dragged along to join the two boys with whom he'd arrived at the camp. The soldiers treated him just as roughly, and Dak wanted to hit somebody. Really hard.

Once the three of them were all lined up, the guard who'd come down the ladder brandishing his sword stepped right in front of them. He looked at one of his partners and gave a curt nod. That man came forward and yanked the

cloth gags out of each prisoner's mouth. Dak coughed and spat when his came out, feeling the sweet rush of air — which only made him thirstier. The soldier threw the wet, slightly bloody pieces of cloth onto the ground and took a place behind the guy in charge.

“Listen to me well,” the man said. “You're the first people to wander into our camps since we heard of . . . ill tidings toward our king and hegemon. On the cusp of the greatest period in Greek history, we have neither the time nor patience to ask who you are or what you want. We've been ordered to take the utmost of precautions, and not to trouble our great leader.”

*This dude is good at speaking a lot of words without saying anything,* Dak thought.

“Do you know who I am?” Aristotle asked, his voice a scratchy rasp.

The soldier's face showed no emotion. “I don't care. If you were anyone of importance, you'd know to stay clear of these lands.”

“I'm Aristotle!” the philosopher yelled, as loudly as his weakened condition would allow. “I practically raised the son of the great king of whom you speak! I demand you take me to him so we can clear up all this nonsense. I demand you free my friends!”

“Aristotle?” the soldier barked, looking around at his comrades. “Look, men. The greatest philosopher in all the world sprouted wings and flew here from Corinth. His powers are even mightier than I thought.”

“I can explain, you fool! The hegemon and his son are in great danger!”

The soldier dropped to one knee and leaned toward them so quickly that Dak recoiled, knocking the back of his head against the hard dirt of the wall.

“I know,” the man said. “We know all too well. Which is why we've been ordered to . . . *deal* with lunatics like yourself who come marching into our camp.” He stood back up, brushing dust from his knee. “You have two choices, prisoners. And consider yourselves lucky that it's not only one. Circumstances allow for a little leniency, when war is on the morrow.”

“What are you talking about?” Dak asked.

The soldier gave him a nasty look, like he didn't care for interruptions. “Your choices are these: death at sunrise, by the gallows, or fight for your

redemption on the front line of the king's army when we attack our first foe. We'll need all the bodies we can get up there, and yours will serve justly."

"Either choice is death!" Aristotle yelled.

The soldier shrugged. "People have survived the front line before. Others . . . have not. The choice is yours. Certain death, or death uncertain. Choose."

Dak had his decision before the words even finished coming out of the guy's mouth. His parents. If the magistrate report Aristotle had read to them was true, Dak's parents were on the front line! This was his easiest and best route at reuniting with them. As for how they'd survive the ordeal . . . well, they'd think of something.

"You," the soldier said, pointing at Riq. "Speak. What's your choice?"

"The front line." He answered so quickly that Dak didn't know what to think of it. Riq had been brooding and distant — but Dak had figured you got that way when captured and thrown into a pit. He wished so badly they could just have a few minutes to *talk*.

"A wise choice," the soldier responded, motioning for someone to come and take Riq away. A guard walked over and cut the ropes binding his wrists, then helped him to his feet. "You may take the spear or sword wound that was meant for our real soldiers, or for the hegemon himself. The gods will never forget. Go. Arm him and send him to the front."

"Wait!" Dak yelled. "I'm going with him! That's my choice."

The soldier grunted. "You're barely the size of a rat. But your flesh can capture a spear as well as any other. Fine, take him as well." As the subordinate moved to obey, slashing at the ropes around Dak's wrists, the soldier in charge stepped in front of Aristotle and looked down at him.

"And you, old man? The glorious philosopher who can fly? What say you?"

Aristotle glanced over at Dak with sad, haunted eyes, then at Riq. He answered in a grave, resigned voice.

"I choose death."





## A Very Large Camp

SERA HAD waited a solid hour, hiding in the darkness under a canvas sheet with a bunch of crates and vegetables. It smelled of olives and mildew, and she could barely breathe, but at least it had been a while since she'd heard any sign of pursuit. Maybe she'd done it after all. Escaped the pit and its soldiers. But the hardest part still lay ahead.

Somehow, she had to find the tent of King Philip. She just hoped the man didn't order her killed on the spot once she got there.

Sera poked her head out of the hiding spot and looked around. People walked about everywhere — soldiers, servants, even a few children, doubtless tagging along with parents working on behalf of the army. If she could find some new clothes maybe she could search for the king without drawing too much attention.

Scampering from one hiding place to another, shadow to shadow, she spent the next half an hour or so trying to do just that. She finally hit the jackpot behind a grimy old tent, where a pile of clothing and rags had been thrown out the back, perhaps for washing later. Sera quickly rummaged

through it until she found a shirt and pants — ratty, torn, filthy. Luckily, the satchel containing the Infinity Ring was brown and rustic and didn't seem out of place.

And so, the search began.

From tent to tent she went, acting as casual as possible, carrying a box she'd found with a bunch of bandages and ointments — somewhere a medic was wondering where in the world he'd misplaced it. Guards and soldiers were everywhere, but, after all, this was an army camp, so she stopped being alarmed at the sight. The entire camp was a busy beehive — supplies being packed, food being prepared, smiths working on weapons, soldiers practicing with swords and spears, servants hustling about so as not to get trampled.

On Sera went, scouring the place with her eyes to find anything that looked like —

And then she spotted it.

One tent towered over the others around it, but she hadn't been able to see it before because of so many smaller tents obscuring her view. The one she saw now was grand and painted in many colors and had a row of soldiers guarding all four sides of it. If there'd ever been a tent fit for a king, that was it.

She made her way toward it, racking her brain for an idea of how to actually get inside. All she needed was five minutes — no, maybe even *one* minute — with King Philip before she could convince him. She knew it. Especially if Alexander had already arrived — he'd remember her for sure. And know that she was a friend to his mentor.

Getting more scared with each and every step she took toward the front flaps of the huge tent, she didn't allow herself to slow. Somehow, someday, she would get inside. Sometimes, being a young person had its advantages — no one would take her as a real threat.

She was about thirty feet away, squeezing past a compact crowd of people going about their business, when a commotion to the far right of the tent caught her attention. Several soldiers were shouting and pushing their way

toward the very spot to which Sera was headed. When they finally broke free and came into her line of view, she stopped and sucked in a quick take of air.

It was Alexander, dragging a soldier — the man who'd captured Sera and her friends — by the scruff of his shirt. As for Alex, he looked as angry as he had when he'd left them back at the palace of his mother, charging away on his horse, Bucephalus. Several other soldiers were with him, and bringing up the rear was Aristotle, completely free of bindings.

*What in the world . . . ?* She had no idea what to think of it, especially upon seeing that Dak and Riq weren't with him. That scared her to no end.

Alexander dragged the soldier all the way to the front of the king's tent and then threw him onto the ground.

"Any man who can't tell the greatness of Aristotle on sight doesn't deserve to live!" he yelled, then reared back like he was going to kick the poor guy, but stopped at the last second, looking back at his master, who was shaking his head back and forth. "Mercy, then. Get back to your duties, soldier."

The man, though obviously hurt, was more than happy to oblige. He jumped to his feet and disappeared quickly into the crowd. Sera acted on instinct, knowing that her chance lay before her like a gift from the Greek gods. She ran forward, straight toward the heir to the king.

"Alexander!" she yelled. "Aristotle! It's me, Sera!"

A couple of guards around Alex jolted to attention — one of them lifted a spear as if to chuck it right at Sera. But Alexander quickly reached out and stopped him.

"No," he ordered. "I know this girl. She's a friend."

And just like that, Sera was officially free. Not able to help herself, she ran to Aristotle and threw her arms around him, hugging the man as if he were the uncle she missed so much from back home. He returned the hug, soothing her with soft words.

"What happened?" she asked, pulling back a bit. "Where are Dak and Riq?"

A grave look shadowed the philosopher's face. "It's been a very complicated few hours. I . . . volunteered myself to die — as silly as it sounds — because I hoped I'd be brought before the king or one of his council members as a matter of policy. Someone finally — *finally* — recognized me and informed Alex, who arrived just yesterday. However . . . as for your friends . . ."

"What?" Sera yelled, her heart forgetting how to beat.

"It was too late when I had them sent for. They've been taken to the front line, and communication on that front is poor to say the least. But don't worry, I'll be sure to get them back — as well as the boy's parents — before any real fighting takes place. Please try not to worry."

He must've read her face, because the worry almost engulfed her. Not to mention the guilt. If she hadn't escaped from the pit, she could've used the Infinity Ring to whisk them all away once they were sent to the front line.

But then she remembered the reason they were here to begin with.

"Have you told him everything?" she asked Aristotle, throwing a wary glance toward Alexander.

The philosopher shook his head slightly. "He knows enough, but the boy seems to have a hard time believing I'm not a cracked pot."

"I'm standing right here, you know," Alexander replied. "Listen, both of you. I have more guards around me than I'd ever need. I am keeping an eye on my father. All is well. Let's go inside and plan our strategies. War is coming."

Aristotle gave Sera a look that was almost comical, a What're-you-gonna-do look. They followed Alexander and the rest of the soldiers and guards into the grand tent of King Philip. Upon entering, Sera's chest swelled with awe. There were fancy carpets and bronze bowls with red-hot coals and thick pillows strewn about for sitting. And, most majestic of all, was the king himself — it had to be him — sitting in a gilded chair, gazing intently at a map rolled open on his lap. Sera was excited to meet him and wished Dak could be there with her — but as it turned out, there was no time for introductions.

The king stood when he saw Alexander, and gruffly handed the map over to a young page waiting beside him.

“Son!” he yelled, with not a hint of joy at seeing him. “Your timing is impeccable. I’ve just been told that the Persians have taken the initiative and are moving in rapidly. Our front line will soon be under attack.”



## The Sound of War

DAK HAD tried to hold on to hope as he, Riq, and a large group of others were sent in a horse-drawn cart through the massive army toward the front line. He kept telling himself that Sera would make a difference, figure out what to do, save them. That he and Riq would find his parents and have a happy reunion, then hang out until someone figured out that this group of people from the future didn't belong on any side of an army, let alone the front.

But that hope was fleeting. As Dak saw the countless soldiers and weapons and horses, and the bleak looks on the faces of those ready to fight, fear filled him. He realized through and through just how mighty the army was — which meant whomever they were prepping to fight must be scary as heck, too. What could Sera possibly do to save them from this mess?

They jostled along, weaving their way through a small break in the sea of soldiers, heading toward their deaths. Dak just hoped that he could be with his parents when it happened. That they could die together.

“You're looking awfully glum,” Riq said.

“I should be more happy, huh? I mean, check this out. I’m about to get killed in a famous historical war. Yippee, right?”

“Right.”

Dak stared at the linguist, a guy who’d sneakily become one of his best friends. He seemed to have so much going on behind his eyes that curiosity won out over all that I’m-about-to-die stuff.

“What in Rasputin’s name are you thinking about over there?” he asked.

Riq yawned, then slightly shook his head. “Just wondering what I can do for this world.”

Dak didn’t know what answer he’d expected, but certainly not *that*. “What you can do for the world? Really? I’d say you’ve done quite a bit so far. And, hey, if we die, there’s still a pretty decent chance that Alexander doesn’t — especially with Sera on the loose. So, we *saved* the world, dude. If I had some root beer, we’d celebrate.” He was trying to cheer things up, and he was afraid he was doing a poor job of it.

“No, man, you don’t get it.” Riq stared off into the distance as he spoke. “Yeah, I think you’re right that we’ll fix the Prime Break. Avoid the Cataclysm and all that. But that doesn’t mean that the world still doesn’t have a lot of room for improvement.”

Dak nodded slowly, showing his best face of contemplation. “Well said. If somehow we don’t get gored by a hundred spears, we can start a charity.”

Riq laughed — the worst courtesy laugh Dak had ever heard. “Yeah. But I just wonder about this time and place. About King Philip and Alexander. It seems like . . . I don’t know. It seems like they need better guidance. With all this power, they could do a lot of good for civilization. For the future.”

“What’re you trying to say?” Dak asked. Something in Riq’s tone had scared him.

Riq never got a chance to answer.

People up ahead had started shouting, all their voices scrambling together to make it impossible for the translator in Dak’s ear to pick up anything. A tension seemed to pass through the crowds of soldiers like a visible wave.

And somewhere, rising in volume, was the sound of thunder. A rolling, thumping noise that shook the ground.

The guard in charge of the horses that'd been leading their cart turned around to face them, his face snapped tight with fear, eyes wide.

“They’re attacking us!” he screamed, then lifted his sword and, for some reason, severed the ropes connecting the horses to the cart. He slapped their rears and shooed them back in the direction from which they’d just come. “Get out!” he shouted at Dak and everyone else. “Grab your weapons and get out! There’s no more time! By authority of the hegemon, I order you to make your way to the front line and help us stop the enemy’s charge. *NOW!*”

The soldier held his sword out as if he’d chop off the head of the first person who refused to obey. Riq was already on his feet, reaching out to help Dak stand. They grabbed their own swords — rusty and dented and dull — from a pile in the front of the cart. Then they jumped to the ground to join the others — most of them too old, too young, or too frail to fight off a chicken, much less an army of Persians.

Terror rattled Dak’s heart, made it hard to breathe. But somehow Riq was keeping his cool, like he’d done this a thousand times.

“Come on,” he said to Dak. “Come on, we can survive this. Stay by me, and we can do it. Come on.”

As they started running through the melee, going in the direction ordered by the guard, Dak struggled for every breath. He knew Riq was lying, saying whatever it took to make him feel better. And Dak loved him for it.

They ran off to war.



Sera had stood to the side of the cavernous tent for twenty minutes or so, watching the king, his son, Aristotle, and many others excitedly talk about what was going on just a few miles from where they stood. They’d been planning to take the fight wherever they needed to go — and soon — but their enemies had brought it to them instead. The hegemon seemed just fine with that, judging by the expression of something like glee on his face as he



pointed at maps and barked orders left and right. The only times he ever paused were to take big gulps of wine from a pewter cup — which his page continually refilled.

A soldier came through the front flap of the tent and didn't wait for permission to speak before he yelled what he had come to say. "They've broken through the front line! It's all-out war!"

Sera's heart shriveled like a rotted raisin. Dak. Riq. Dak's parents. How could they possibly survive? Her only hope was that maybe they hadn't gotten far before the fighting had begun. Maybe they were stuck in the middle of the huge army safe for the moment.

*Dak, she thought. Oh, Dak. Riq. Please be safe. Please!* She didn't know what she'd do if she lost her best friends after all they'd been through.

The hustle and bustle of planning and shouting orders continued inside the tent. Every minute or so, a soldier would leave, sprinting, ready to carry those orders out into the field. At the same rate, others would return with progress reports. The whole thing seemed like chaos, but Sera was sadly familiar with it by now. It seemed to her that war was all too similar across cultures and epochs.

She then noticed something. Something very odd, that everyone else — amid that very chaos — had failed to realize yet. The king had sat down. Just a few minutes earlier, he'd been animated, throwing around his arms, stomping his feet, yelling and screaming. Now he sat as others continued in his place. And he looked weak. Pale. He slumped in the gilded chair, seeming to shrink right before her eyes. Every ounce of blood had drained from his face.

And then she knew.

Poison.

The wine.

Then, to her horror, she saw Alexander with a cup in his hand. The page must've just handed it to him — his hands had been empty before. But now he had some of the wine. He was raising it to his lips.

“No!” she screamed. She was running. Jumping over bunched-up carpets. Pushing people out of her way. The cup was almost to Alexander’s lips. She ran harder, the tent suddenly feeling like it was a mile wide. “No!” she screamed again.

Alexander opened his mouth.

Sera took another step.

Alexander tilted the cup, tilted his head.

Sera reached him.

Diving, she lashed her hand out and knocked the cup away from the man’s hand, sending a spray of red wine all over the place. The cup fell to the ground with a thump and a bounce, and wine fell like droplets of rain onto the carpet. Sera landed and rolled, now on her back, looking up at Alexander, who glared down at her with more surprise than fury.

“What in the name of Zeus?” he called out.

But all she could do was smile. Despite it all, despite knowing her friends might be dead, despite the loss of the king, she smiled — a thing of triumph, not glee.

In that moment, without a shred of doubt, Sera knew she had just prevented the Cataclysm. Once and for all. Mission complete.



## The Rage of War

DAK HAD once daydreamed of moments like this — so often. Lying in bed, sitting in class, staring at a book without comprehending the words.

Imagining himself in one of history's great wars, wielding a sword, bearing down on his enemies with all the wrath of a Greek god on the cusp of defeat.

If he'd learned one thing during his travels, it's that real war was far from glamorous. This battle was no exception. Most of the time, he just tried to avoid getting trampled by people on his own team. And he'd yet to stab or maim so much as a big toe. Sticking close to Riq, they weaved their way through the chaos of battle, doing their very best not to kill *or* be killed.

An enemy soldier loomed over them, appearing out of a thick knot of clashing warriors, a spear raised with both hands. His face wore a scowl of hatred, like he'd been oppressed his whole life by two kids from the future. Riq swung his sword upward just as the man's thrust came down, shattering the wood of the weapon into a dozen pieces. The man screamed bloody murder, but a tide of battling bodies swept him away, and Riq and Dak ran, threading through and dodging the clashes as best they could. Dak had no

idea where Riq was trying to go, but he had a sudden and desperate dependency on the older boy.

Dust filled the air, along with screams and grunts, the clang of metal against metal, the peal of horses in pain, and thunderous roars of battle that all melded together into a chorus of war and rage. As much as Dak loved history and reading about wars, he'd never again wish to be in the middle of one.

Soldiers attacked them. Dak and Riq survived moment to moment, deflecting weapons, dodging, running. On they went.

They broke into a rare clearing, and what Dak saw before him made the entire world freeze into a bubble of silence and wonder, every sound a buzz in his ears, barely heard over the hammering of his heart.

Ten feet away, his parents lay on the ground, clasped in each other's arms.



Sera rode on the back of a horse, her arms holding on to Aristotle's waist. She gripped him so hard that her muscles ached, but she was terrified of falling off the charging beast. Alexander rode beside them on Bucephalus, the new king standing in the stirrups, his right arm brandishing a sword forward as if it had the power to cut through the sea of battling soldiers before them, which seemed to stretch to every horizon. Other soldiers, also on horses, flanked them on both sides as they surged ahead, moving like an icebreaker ship hacking its way through the Arctic.

Sera just squeezed her grip and rested her head on Aristotle's back, wanting to close her eyes — as if that would make it all go away. The scenes of battle — the horror of it — made her wince. It was all just so awful. She hoped — desperately — that they could achieve what Alexander had promised once her explanations had been given in the tent: to find Dak and Riq, to find Dak's parents, and to take them away from the raging war. To take them to safety.

Sera had saved Alexander's life, though not until she'd seen the hegemon die from the poison. But perhaps that's what was fated to happen all along.

For *Alexander* to lead the armies of Greece, here and now. For Alexander the Third to become Alexander the . . . Great.

“There!” Aristotle roared, shockingly loud considering the noise around them. “I see them!” He was pointing madly to their right. And then came the words that eased the cinch around her heart for the first time in hours.

“They’re still alive!”

Alexander altered course.



Dak hadn’t lived that many years when it really got down to it. But in his decade or so of life — especially since being recruited to the Hystorians — he’d experienced a lot of different emotions. Happy and sad. Victorious and disappointed. Despair. Anger. Love. Hate. Lots of stuff.

But never, not once, had he ever felt the thing that swelled within him at the sight of his parents, alive, huddling in each other’s arms as armies fought around them. It was a thing that he’d never be able to explain and would probably never feel again. Tears stung his eyes and a wonderful pain filled his chest. There they were.

His parents.

“Mom!” he yelled. “Dad!” He was already sprinting toward them, almost oblivious to the danger that swarmed in from all directions. From what he could see, it looked as if his mom had tripped and fallen over a wounded soldier, and then his dad had joined her, practically on top of her, like a shield.

Dak slid to the ground on his knees, coming to a stop just a few inches short of his parents. Finally, they both turned their heads to see their son. Even as they did so, two men clashed swords right above them, the crack of metal against metal vibrating through the air. Luckily, the soldiers, swords locked, moved to the side. The sounds of war everywhere else raged on.

“Dak,” his dad said. The poor man’s face was pale with worry, his skin tight, fear burning in his eyes. The word came out almost as a whisper, more disbelief than anything else.

“You’re safe now,” Dak replied, having no clue what else to say.

His mom saw him, but her whole face was pinched up and tears streamed from her eyes. Finally, Dak just lunged forward, and they all hugged, gripping one another and crying and trying to say words but none that came out intelligible. Death and mayhem surrounded them, but for that moment, they were all alive, and they were together. After months of chasing through time after time.

They were together.



It took a universe of effort for Riq to stand still and allow Dak to have his moment with his parents. He couldn't think of a much worse place to have a family reunion, but the Smyths hadn't had much choice in the matter. Finally, when the hug and joy had gone on for a good twenty seconds, Riq had to speak up.

"Dak!" he called out. "None of this will do much good if we get ourselves killed. We need to protect ourselves!" He did a quick turn, his weapon held out, ready to fight off anyone close. They'd been lucky enough to find themselves in a random clearing of the fight, but that wouldn't last much longer.

Dak scrambled to his feet, slyly wiping a tear on his shoulder. He helped his parents stand up, then they all moved closer to Riq, forming a circle with their backs to one another. A man with a veil over his face, spear held high, charged at them, screaming words too laced with bloodlust to comprehend. Fear thumped inside Riq, but he kept it at bay, waiting, forcing himself to remain still until the very last second.

With a yell, he lifted his sword with both hands, striking the spear just before it slammed into his own chest. The man was taken off guard, losing his balance as he tried to rebound from his spear being swatted upward, and he fell flat on his back. Riq raised his sword and screamed, glowering with all the anger he could muster at an enemy he didn't know. It was just enough that the guy rolled away, got up, and ran back into the thicker melee of battling soldiers.

“Not bad,” Mr. Smyth said. “Looks like you guys have picked up a few tricks while chasing us through time.”

“Lovely spot for a family vacation,” his wife added.

Riq didn't have time to respond. The man he thought he'd just defeated reappeared, and this time he had seven or eight of his companions with him. After pushing his way through a wall of clashing soldiers, the guy raised his spear and pointed its sharp tip right at Riq.

And then they all charged in.



## Upon the Horses

SERA'S ELATION at hearing that her friends were still alive only lasted a moment. When she finally got a good look at them — when Alexander changed their course and the other horses followed — she saw that Dak and the others were backed together in a group and a crowd of robed soldiers was coming at them with weapons raised.

“Dak!” she screamed, as if that could help him at all. “Riq! Run!” She felt so hopeless, and the words sounded stupid. Trying to will the horses to gallop faster, she stared, her heart rattling with terror.

The leading man — holding a spear out in front of him as if he wanted to pole vault — reached Dak's group first, but Riq took a step forward, swinging an old, dented sword in an arc that snapped the spear into two pieces. Sera cheered loudly before she could help herself, and despite knowing that it'd been a lucky shot and that plenty of death was coming in right behind the first guy. Swords were raised. Battle yells were roared. For a split second, Sera caught a glimpse of Dak's face, and it was painted white with fear. She felt



such a rush of concern and love for her friend that it felt like she might explode.

And then Alexander was on them.

His mighty horse, Bucephalus, charged into the crowd of onrushing soldiers, tossing them to the sides like stalks of corn. They scrambled and dove, and a couple of them weren't lucky enough to avoid the hammering hooves of the beast. Riq turned away from it, and shoved Dak and the Smyths to safety, even as Alexander stood up in his stirrups and started swinging away with his sword, cutting down the enemy at a speed that seemed impossible. His companions joined in, just as more of the robed fighters appeared to help their friends. In a matter of seconds, it had turned into an all-out battle of clanging swords and shouts of pain.

"Go get them!" Sera yelled into Aristotle's ear. "Get them!" She knew he understood, and their horse leapt toward Dak and the others even before the words had finished coming out of her mouth.



Dak had a million thoughts go through his mind in an instant. Mostly he was fixated on how ridiculously brave Riq had become, fighting off dudes with that old sword of his. For a long moment, it felt as if Riq was all that stood between them and certain death.

But then there were horses. Alexander. Chaos. Swords swinging and men screaming.

Then he heard his name.

"Dak!"

He looked up and saw a horse coming right at him, leaping over fallen soldiers. Aristotle had the reins, a fierceness gripping his features. Sera was behind him, holding on to him with one arm and pointing at Dak with the other.

"Mom, Dad, quick!" he yelled at his parents. He grabbed them by the arms and pulled them close, then waited for Aristotle's horse to pull up right beside them. "Quick, get on!"

They tried to complain, tried to insist he get on first, but he ignored them, finding strength he never knew he had, practically lifting them onto the horse himself. Sera had slipped off, helping out.

“What are you doing?” he yelled at her, even as his mom was able to finally get her legs situated correctly on both sides of the horse.

“You can’t fit that many people!” she answered, with a quick jerk of her head behind them. Another couple of horses were waiting for them, their riders keeping all enemy soldiers at bay with their swords. Dak made sure his parents were secure behind Aristotle, then swatted the horse’s rear end to get it going. With a loud whinny it galloped off, dodging soldiers as it went. Dak followed Sera toward another horse and rider that had come with the philosopher.

Dak noticed that Riq had not backed down from the fight. He stood shoulder to shoulder with Alexander and his companions.

“Riq!” he yelled at him. “We need to go! Come on!”

His friend swatted away a sword, then turned to look back. “No! Just go! I’ll make sure you can escape!” But he’d hardly said the last word before he vaulted into the air, lifted by a man on a white horse that had come out of nowhere, breaking through the line of defense set up by Alexander and his partners.

“Riq!” Dak shouted, this time with horror. An enemy soldier had just single-handedly picked Riq up like a bag of leaves and thrown him across the saddle of the horse. The man kicked the sides of the animal and it burst into a gallop, charging away.

Dak knew they had to follow, but he had barely looked up at the horse he’d hoped to ride with Sera when a thrown spear hurtled through the air and landed with a sickening *thunk* in the friendly rider’s chest. He groaned, his eyes rolling up into his head, then he toppled off the horse and onto the ground. It was like the entire world had just shifted on its plates. Dak held off the panic that tried to paralyze him. He had to act — Alexander and everyone else were too busy fighting.

“Come on, Sera!” he yelled, motioning for her to jump onto the now riderless animal.

She didn’t argue or hesitate — throwing a foot into the stirrup, she was up there in three seconds. Dak followed, almost knocking her off when he swung his leg around to the other side. He’d planned on being in front, but somehow she’d ended up in the driver’s seat.

“Ride!” he yelled.

Sera turned to him and shouted back, “What about your parents?”

“They’ll be safe with Aristotle!”

“And Alexander?”

Dak shook with impatience. “Look at the dude — he’s in his element. Now ride!”

“You got it.” Sera shook the reins and made a nickering sound that somehow rose above the din of battle around them, and the horse leapt into motion, jumping over wounded soldiers as it fell into pursuit, chasing after Riq.

Dak held on tight.



## A Sea of War

AS MUCH as Alexander was in his element, Sera was far out of hers, and she knew it. Holding on to the reins so fiercely that her fingers hurt, she kept her eyes riveted to what lay before her, directing as best she could: swinging around one-on-one clashes, hearing the ring of sword against sword, jumping over fallen soldiers, dashing through every break that opened up. All the while, following the man who'd taken Riq.

Luckily, the horse they rode seemed battle tested and intelligent, knowing what to do and acting even before Sera tried to “drive” the reins. Most people in the army were too busy attacking or defending to pay them notice, and on they rode. Dak was hurting her middle, he squeezed so tight from behind, but it was comforting to know he was there and safe. For now, at least.

A soldier was running toward the path right ahead of them, coming in at an angle so he could intercept them. Dak yelled for her to look out.

“I see him!” she called back. “Put your foot to good use!”

She felt Dak shift behind her, leaning toward the right a bit. She leaned the other direction to maintain their balance. She didn't know why this one particular soldier had singled them out. Maybe he just wanted some easy prey. But he came up to their side just as she rode the horse through a narrow clearing between major clashes of fighting soldiers. With a scowl that chilled her blood, he pulled out a dagger and made as if to throw it, aiming.

“Now!” Sera yelled.

Dak kicked out and knocked the knife away, then shifted his foot the other direction to smack the guy in the face so he couldn't attempt to pull them off. Screaming obscenities, the man fell into a patch of mud just in time for two soldiers to trip and fall on top of him. Sera caught only a brief glance, but no one in the trio seemed too happy about the situation.

Dak had almost slipped completely off, but he righted himself behind her. She could feel the heavy breaths in his chest as he leaned into her and got his grip again.

They'd gained ground on Riq despite the little altercation. Sera willed the horse to go even faster.



Surprisingly, Riq felt no fear. Maybe, after overcoming so much, he'd finally grown cold to terror. Hardened up, grown thicker skin. Whatever the reason, he felt a calming wave slow his pulse as he was jostled along, thrown across the back of the enemy's horse like a big bag of grain. The man who'd heaved him off the ground was shockingly strong, having quashed every tiny effort Riq had made to squirm out of the position. When it proved impossible, he'd decided to wait it out — wait until the perfect opportunity presented itself.

He didn't understand why he'd been taken. Maybe this guy had seen a chance to have a prisoner — maybe he thought Riq was a close friend to Alexander since they'd been fighting side by side. Maybe the dude just wanted an excuse to get away from the battle and save his own skin.

It didn't matter. Riq had no intention of reaching whatever the soldier's destination happened to be. Risking the man's wrath, he turned his head to

look back in the direction from which they'd come. The horse jumped over something just as he did it, and his chin banged against the leather of the saddle. He bit his lip and cried out in pain. The rider punched him, right in the kidneys. The pain was intense — a flash of agony.

But then Riq saw Sera. And Dak behind her. Sitting on a horse. Coming at him. Coming *for* him.

*My friends*, he thought.



“Almost there!” Dak yelled, every muscle in his body tense. There was something amazing about riding on a horse like this — especially through a sea of fighting armies. The adrenaline pumping through him seemed like it had been amped up a million times over.

“What do we do?” Sera shouted without turning back to him. Dak knew keeping the horse under control had to take a ridiculous amount of concentration.

Dak had no idea how to answer. “Just get close! Something brilliant will pop into my head!”

She muttered something that he couldn't hear. He imagined it was something to the effect of “We'd be better off using *my* head.” But this was Dak's moment. He felt as if the others had saved him so often and had, whether meaning to or not, always treated him like the annoying little brother. But today he planned on becoming the big brother.

The sounds of war — screams and clanks and yells and grunts — filled the air as they rushed past countless soldiers battling one another. Sometimes the sight of it was gruesome, and Dak had no idea who was winning. But they kept their course, dodging and weaving and jumping whenever they needed to. Riq was only a few feet ahead of them now, the dirt kicked up by that horse's hooves dusting the nose of their own horse. The thunderous roar of their galloping thumped in Dak's ears.

Then, just like that, he knew what he was going to do. And he was glad he didn't have time to think it over.

“Pull to the left!” he yelled at Sera. “Get as close as you can!”

Thankfully, she didn't ask for any more details and guided the horse accordingly. Seeing her trusting him like this, following his command, made the whole ordeal worth it. Unless he died. He really didn't want to die.

The horse kicked into high gear and lunged ahead, pulling even with Riq and his captor, who looked over at them like he'd just seen an alien spaceship zoom in. He yelled something unintelligible, then reached for the sword that hung from his waist, holding Riq down with his other hand. But Dak wasn't going to let him get his weapon or do anything else.

Holding on to Sera's shoulders for leverage, he brought both of his legs up until he could get his feet under him, then crouched on the saddle. The soldier had grabbed the hilt of the sword, had started to pull the weapon from its sheath. Dak straightened his legs with full force and jumped, leaping across the narrow gap between the horses and slamming headfirst into the shoulder of Riq's captor. The man slipped several inches but then grabbed the pommel of his saddle, fighting for balance. Dak wrapped his arms around him and fought like crazy, tugging at the big guy with what little strength he had, trying to get him off the horse.

Riq was free now, but in too awkward of a position to do much. Dak could see him attempting to get into a sitting position, but the horse's jouncing movement slammed him back onto his stomach. Dak kept struggling, avoiding the man's punches and elbows, weaving and ducking his head in all directions. Squeezing as tightly as possible with his arms lassoed around the soldier's chest, Dak picked up his flailing feet and settled their soles against the side of the horse. Then he jerked backward with his arms and kicked out with his feet.

It worked.

He and the soldier tumbled off of the horse and slammed into the ground.



Riq scrambled, twisting this way and that until he could finally get in a position to throw himself into the seat of the now-empty saddle. Filled with

dread at what might've happened or would happen to Dak, he grabbed the reins and pulled back, too much too fast. The horse reared up on its back legs, kicking its front ones, and Riq toppled off as well, landing with a graceless thump onto the ground.

But then he was on his feet. Running. He saw Dak and the soldier who'd kidnapped him each struggling to gain the upper hand. Even as he looked, Riq saw the man climb on top, pinning Dak down with his legs.

"No!" Riq shouted, running harder.

The soldier pulled a dagger out of some hidden pocket, lifted it toward the sky, ready to drive it down and end Dak's life. Riq was too far away. His throat almost ripped from the scream that burst out of his lungs. The man's arms swung with a mighty force toward Dak's chest.

There was a blur of movement, a flash of brown, an inhuman squeal of rage.

Like magic, from nowhere, Sera and her horse jumped out of the nearby fray, leaping through the air. The animal's front hooves crashed into the soldier on top of Dak, throwing him violently off and sending the dagger in a flying spin until it landed with a thud in a patch of flattened grass. The soldier lay still to the side of Dak, dazed or dead, Riq didn't care.

He picked up his friend, finding strength from somewhere deep, and threw him onto the horse behind Sera. Then he himself used a stirrup to join them, leaping onto the horse's back, reaching forward to squeeze both Sera and Dak in one big hug.

"Go!" he yelled, and they went.





## The King's Right-Hand Man

DAK REALIZED now that he knew almost nothing about war and its horrors. But there was one thing he'd come to understand, and it was hard-won wisdom: Rarely were there true winners in a battle — what with the lives lost, injuries sustained, and loved ones devastated. But he had a feeling that the armies of Alexander would cross the world and do good things in the long run, despite the losses and heartache. And, at least for one day, they'd taken a successful step and driven back the armies of Persia and their surprise invasion.

Now he sat with his friends around a fire, its smoke floating up like a stream of ghosts to disappear out of a hole in the top of King Philip's tent. The former hegemon, now dead. Alexander was king now, and he sat on a stool, staring at the flames, probably brooding about how much his life had changed in such a short time. He'd never wept for his father, but his face had shown it all, especially when he'd ridden back into camp atop his majestic horse, Bucephalus.

As for Dak and his friends, they'd ridden fast and hard, finally finding a break in the battle — enough to get outside the main sea of soldiers and take the long way back to camp, where they'd finally been treated with the respect

and care they deserved. Dak was exhausted, sapped of energy, and aching from a million cuts and bruises. Riq and Sera were no better by the looks of it. They'd hardly said a word since returning.

But they'd won. As far as they could tell, they'd won.

The Great Breaks had all been fixed.

Dak was nervous about going back to the future. A small part of him dreaded it, worried that they'd pop into a nightmare of a world, on the brink of collapse and destruction. But most of him — all the good parts — knew they'd succeeded. How he could be so sure, he had no clue. But, deep down, he just knew it.

Aristotle looked the worst out of all of them. The man stood up, his robes and hair filthy, his face marked with a dozen small wounds.

“We must return to Corinth,” he said. “Olympias and Pausanias have been taken there, ready to be judged for their crimes against our former king. We have a long journey ourselves.” He raised a hand to stop Sera before she could even get the words out. “No, my child. My days using the Infinity Ring are over, I'm afraid. We'll be traveling the old-fashioned way.”

Dak liked the sound of that. He liked it a lot. A trip through Greece? Seeing the sights? His spirits lifted a thousand times. Plus, what was the rush getting back to their own day? They had all the time in the world. He snickered at his brilliant thought, something he'd been waiting a long time to think.

“What do you think about your parents disappearing?” Alexander suddenly asked — the man rarely spoke, and when he did, he made you want to jump through hoops to give him a good answer. “Troubling, is it not?”

Actually, it wasn't. Sera had warned him that it would happen, which had given him an opportunity to say good-bye to his mom and dad before they'd ghosted out. Because they had been cut loose in the time stream without the Ring, it was the Great Breaks that had kept them stuck in the past, warping from one Break to another until only the Prime Break remained. And with that now fixed, the fabric of reality was able to heal itself. That meant anomalies like Dak's parents were being sent back where they belonged.

At least, that's what Sera had said. Dak was too tired to doubt any of it.

"I'm not worried," he told Alexander, not wanting to start a discussion about the intricacies of time travel. "My mom and dad have always had their own way of doing things. We'll . . . see them soon enough."

The new king nodded, surely thinking about how he'd just lost his own parents. But he was too focused on the huge task ahead of him to let anything daunt him for long. "I admire your spirit, boy. I liked you from the instant I saw you climb the statue of Plato. May the gods bless you all." He stood up as if to leave — even though it was his own tent now — but Riq didn't let him go.

"Wait," he said. "Alex — I mean, King . . . Lord hegemon . . ." He looked at Dak in desperation, not knowing how to address him.

"Just call him Alexander," Dak replied, loving every second of it.

"Speak your mind," the king ordered. "I'm weary and need to rest for the battles to come."

Riq straightened, his chest puffing out. "I'd like to join your army. Fight by your side."

Dak and Sera were on him in an instant, throwing out questions left and right. The world suddenly felt surreal and unstable again, as if the Breaks hadn't been corrected after all. What could he possibly be talking about?

"You guys, stop," Riq said quietly. But something in his face silenced Dak completely, and he knew there'd be no changing his friend's mind. Riq wasn't going back with them. "Both of you knew this was coming. My future was altered, and I can't go back." He lowered his voice. "But I can have a future here, and I can make a difference. These people need my help. I think their intentions are good, but they obviously have a lot to learn about civility and treating other cultures with respect. I can do them a lot of good."

"But . . ." Dak started, and didn't finish. His heart hurt. Sera's face had melted into the saddest frown he'd ever seen. "But," he repeated.

"Trust me, okay?" Riq replied, reaching out to squeeze both Dak's and Sera's shoulders. "This is what I have to do."

“What about Kisa?” Sera asked. “You could go and be with her and the Maya.”

Riq shook his head. “No. She has her own destiny. Mine is here. To help Alexander change the world. And hey, what’s the big deal? You have a time-travel device. You can come visit me anytime you want. Duh.” He smiled, then turned his gaze to the king. “Will you have me, hegemon?”

Alexander, tired and worn out as he might be, looked every bit a king as he walked over and stood in front of Riq. “I’d be honored to have you by my side. I really would. And there you’ll be, always, to the four corners of the earth. But I’m giving you a new name, a . . . *Greek* name. You are a builder, a maker, and so I name you after Hephaestus, god of fire. From this day forward you’ll be known as Hephaestion. Be back here at dawn to plan our next move.” And with that, Alexander left, leaving his own tent to Riq and the others for their good-byes.

Dak felt no shame as he hugged his two best friends in the world and bawled his eyes out.



## Dinosaurs

SERA LOOKED up, way up, and saw something that she surely never imagined she would: the long, long neck of an Apatosaurus. Its gigantic mouth munched and munched as it tore the leaves off of a tree.

She wasn't dreaming. This was real. And it had all been Aristotle's idea.

"Cool," Dak whispered, staring above with his mouth hanging open like the cargo door of a giant airplane. "Cool."

Olympias — mother of Alexander the Third, wearer of amethysts, plotter of murders — sat upon a stone, her hands and feet bound by a material that the great philosopher said would dissolve within a few hours. Right next to her, Pausanias himself sat, tied up and brooding like a punished child. He was an ugly guy, and Sera was anxious to warp back to the time of Greece so she wouldn't have see his traitorous face anymore.

"How could you do this to us?" Olympias asked, as calm, cool, and collected as Sera had ever seen her. "How will you go throughout the rest of your lives, living with the guilt of leaving us here to be eaten by these monsters?"

“Oh, stop your complaining,” Dak answered, finally pulling his gaze from the enormous beast that towered above them. “This region is dominated by herbivores, and there’s plenty of food and fresh water for you guys to live long happy years together. You deserve each other. Just be glad that Aristotle didn’t let them throw you in the dark dungeons, like the hegemon ordered. This is paradise.”

Sera did feel a *little* guilty, but Dak made a great point. Alexander had felt so utterly betrayed by his own mother that he’d wanted the harshest of punishments. Olympias and Pausanias were actually getting off easy. Way easy. Most civilizations would’ve put them to death. In fact, Alexander intended to tell everyone that Pausanias, at least, had been killed. The new hegemon couldn’t afford to look weak.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Pausanias grumbled. “Just please explain why I saw doubles of you two while we were . . . journeying here.”

Sera almost laughed. She’d inputted a wrong number when calculating the warp back to prehistoric times, and they’d appeared just as their doubles were leaving the stables to go back and stop Tilda from killing Alexander the first time. Thinking about it confused even her, so she couldn’t imagine what Olympias and her partner in crime thought about it.

“It’ll give you something to ponder for the rest of your life,” Dak answered. “With the dinosaurs. I’m kind of jealous, to be honest. Seems like a cool place. And don’t worry, T. rexes don’t come around these parts.”

“T. rexes?” Olympias asked, looking baffled.

“Never mind.”

“Come on,” Sera said, stepping beside Dak and holding out the Infinity Ring. “Let’s go say our final bye-bye to Aristotle.” They had two more trips to make. Back to Greece, then back to the modern day, where hopefully everything was hunky-dory. Then maybe they could spend a few months healing from the toll all that time traveling took on their bodies.

Dak reached out and put his hand on the cool metal of the Ring, then he gave one last glance at the banished prisoners. “I hope you guys learned your

lesson. And don't be mad at us. It was Aristotle's idea, and we just do what we're told. He's the boss of the Hystorians, you know."

Sera loved the expression of confusion that swept over the face of Olympias. She pushed the button and quantum physics took them back to Greece, far in the future and long ago, depending on how you looked at it. She just never knew how to think of such things anymore.



"I don't really know what to say," Aristotle said as they sat on the balcony in the place they'd had their first deep discussion. Dak thought it seemed like thousands of years ago, which, in a way, was true. "We've been through so much in such a relatively short period of time. It's hard to say good-bye to friends. Friendship is a single soul living in two bodies. Or, in our case, four. At least I'll get to see Riq — I mean, Hephaestion — again, once the wars are over."

Dak nodded, not sure what to say himself. He was itching to get back to the modern day and make sure his parents were okay. And that the world wasn't, you know, about to blow up into tiny pieces. Sera did the talking for them.

"So, how are things going to work now?" she asked. "I know that talking about this stuff can drive you nuts, but since we corrected all the Breaks . . . then that means you don't need to start the Hystorians. But if you never start the Hystorians, how will we know to go back and . . . Oh, never mind."

Dak was glad she stopped. His head was starting to hurt.

Aristotle chuckled, a great sound coming out of the great man. He looked a million times better than he had right after the fighting.

"Not to worry, Sera. I suspect these things are simpler than we make them out to be. Most people will have no memory of the former time line, though for you two they will remain linear recollections. In fact, including your Remnants, you will have memories of three distinct time lines, in whole or in part. "

Now Dak's head *really* hurt. "Boulders in the river of time. That's what I always say when I don't have a clue what anyone's talking about."

That earned another couple of laughs, especially from Sera.

After a few moments, Aristotle grew serious. "Still, we know now that history is a special thing. And that it can be changed — but with dire consequences. I'm still going to form the Hystorians, and create a society that will last throughout the ages." He paused, scratching that grand beard of his. Then he held up a finger in true philosopher form.

"But this time things will be a little different," the old man said. "Instead of putting our focus on *changing* history, we will now do everything in our power to *protect* it. That's what we'll do, my friends. We will protect history until our last, dying breaths."

Dak wanted to high-five the guy, right there on the spot. But instead he hugged him.

Then came the good-byes, along with more tears.





## The Final Remnant

TO THE future they went.

They warped to the Hystorian headquarters first. But . . . it wasn't there. Instead, all they saw was a big field, lined with rows of corn.

So they zapped themselves nearby to Sera's house next. Half of her was terrified to discover what awaited her in this new world, and the other half could hardly stand the wait. Dak had to break into a run to keep up with her as they made their way through the neighborhood.

"Things sure seem . . . normal," Dak said, slightly out of breath.

"Yeah. They do. And it's weird about the Hystorians being gone." But everything around them seemed brighter, the people happier, the colors and edges sharper. So far they hadn't seen one sign of destruction or oppression.

"I bet they still exist in some way," Dak responded. "Maybe they're a lot smaller now, without the SQ to fight. I don't know. But it sure looks like we re-created a pretty good planet, if I do say so myself."

Sera slapped him on the back. "Say it all you want. By jove, I think we've done it."

Dak whacked her on the shoulder, though not as hard. “You know, funny that you say that. The phrase ‘by jove’ originated in . . .” He trailed off, his face showing that he’d just been kidding. Although she honestly missed his constant spewing of historical facts. She hoped he relearned everything quickly so he could get back to it.

And then they were there. Her house. Where her uncle had raised her but she’d felt a thousand Remnants that her parents would arrive at any second.

“They’re alive,” Dak said, standing by her just as he’d always done. “I know it.”

She nodded, then let instinct take over. The next few minutes were like a dream, as if the Remnants of her past were slowly unfolding to her like a storybook.

The front door was locked.

They rang the doorbell. No one answered.

They went around the back.

Through the yard.

Down the little dusty lane.

A long, beautiful, dreamy walk.

To the barn. That barn way behind the house.

And the doors opened.

And out they came.

Her mom.

Her dad.

Smiling.

Talking.

Laughing.

When they saw her, she bolted into a run, crossing the grassy distance faster than any horse ever could. They were shocked at her excitement when she hugged them fiercely, kissed them, laughed, and cried.

“My goodness,” her mom said, pulling back and looking delightedly at her daughter. “What in the world has come over you?”

“I just missed you is all,” Sera said. “I just missed you so much.”



The day had been a total blur for Dak.

Everything had changed, yet in some ways, it all felt the same, too. There was something perfect about it, and he felt happier than he had in a long time.

After the incredible reunion between Sera and her parents — he was man enough to admit it, he'd gotten a bit choked up — they'd walked over to Dak's house, where his own mom and dad were busy in the lab, working on twenty projects at once. It was a huge relief when he saw them alive and well. But what really made him happy was that they were doing what they loved — solving the world's problems, one by one.

The Smyths and the Frostes had actually joined forces, forming a company to seek out, discover, and invent practical scientific solutions to everything from illness to environmental issues. Their company was called Solving Quantum Physics.

*Yep*, Dak thought. *The SQP*. He thought that was just about the best thing ever.

“Dak.”

It was Sera, pulling him back to the real world. They were sitting on a big branch of their favorite tree, enjoying the cool air and the *cleanness* of it, drinking juice. She had a tablet out, scrolling through some article with taps of her fingers. It had caught her interest big-time, judging by the look of her eyes.

“So?” he asked. “What did you find?”

“Oh, you know. Just checking out the history of Alexander the Great. That's right, the *Great*. And his best friend, Hephaestion.”

Dak's jaw dropped. “What? Yeah, right.”

“I'm serious! Look for yourself. It's in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.”

Dak took the tablet from her and read through the article she'd found. He couldn't believe it. He absolutely couldn't believe it. Alexander and his armies had crossed the world, fighting when they had to, but also bringing food and knowledge and resources to countless people. Riq — renamed

Hephaestion by Alexander himself — had become a dear friend and confidant to the hegemon. He was thought by many to be the true force behind the king maintaining respect for other cultures at the same time as advancing the world in the greatest leap yet in human history. They called it the Iron Empire.

Riq.

Hephaestion.

Bestie to Alexander the Great.

Dak realized he'd been holding his breath, and he let out a long and loud exhale. "That's the single coolest thing I've ever read in my entire life. Our boy did pretty well, huh? That's our boy!"

Sera laughed, and Dak loved the sound of it. They'd come so close, so many times, to everything being ruined. To death. To the end of the world. It was good to be home again. It was really, really good.

"So, what do we do with this thing?" Sera asked. She held up the satchel, the shape of the Infinity Ring obvious through the cloth.

Dak stared at it for a long time, as if the answer might appear in the stitches. "I don't know. I think once my head doesn't feel like it got beaten by a hammer from warping so much, I might be tempted to go hang out in ancient Rome for a few days."

Sera shook her head. "I know you're kidding, but we really can't do that. It seems like the world is in pretty good shape, and we better not mess it up."

"So, what are you saying? That we should destroy it? Like Riq did with Tilda's Eternity Ring?"

"No, no, no. No way. Who knows what might happen in the future. Or . . . the past?"

"Yeah," Dak agreed. "We're safe for now, but you never know. So let's decide where to put the Ring."

Sera shrugged. "I guess we can wrap it in plastic, put it in a box, bury it. I say we give normal life a chance for a while. Sound good?"

"Sounds good times infinity."

They were silent for a while, listening to birds and wind and rustling leaves. The branch swayed a little, making Dak sleepy. It'd be nice to take a

nap and not worry if the world might end the next day.

“It was fun, huh?” Sera finally said.

Dak looked at her. His best friend. “Yeah, it was. Not that I’d want to do it again.”

“Me, neither. But I’ll never forget what we did.”

“Save the world?” Dak asked.

“Yep, save the world. And I’m glad it was with you.”

She smiled then, and Dak decided not to say anything back. Sometimes words just weren’t enough.



# Golden

TILDA SAT, crouched, withered, dying, in the filthy corner of the alley. All of majestic Athens rose up around her, but no one cared about the sad little woman with the hair that once shone like flames. Now it was dull and lifeless and limp, like the last dying embers of a once mighty fire.

She huddled, cold despite the heat. Hungry despite the rat she'd just eaten. Shivering, she leaned against the wall and wept. Every day she'd cried, hopeless and hating the world. Hating the Hystorians. Hating that boy. That girl. That other boy.

They'd done this to her. They'd ruined her. They'd ruined her future.  
Oh, how she hated them.

But it didn't matter. It was over. Though not gracious in defeat, she at least knew she'd been beaten. The SQ was no more.

And so, she'd wait.

She'd wait for death.



The next day, it still hadn't come.

That evening, a light flashed nearby, accompanied by the crackling sounds of thunder and sparks. Wind rushed through the alley, picking up leaves and trash, pelting her body. Then a sudden darkness blossomed, making her feel as if she'd been cast into a dungeon. Scared, she shifted, trying to shrink farther into the corner.

The shadow of a man stood before her. It took a while, but her eyes adjusted, and she could finally see him, standing there, silent and watchful. He was bald, and hideous scars marked his face. He wore a robe, its hood pulled down around his shoulders. And there was something terribly wrong with one of his eyes, though she couldn't quite see well enough to know for sure.

"Who are you?" she asked in a rasp, her throat dry as decayed bones.

The man sank toward the ground and knelt before her. That eye. She could see it now. Bloodshot and puffy, like it was riddled with disease.

"My name doesn't matter," he answered, his voice deep. "I'm a descendant of Ilsa, the only name we speak."

"Ilsa?" Tilda repeated.

"Yes. I have something to show you."

The man pulled out a metallic object, shining golden even in the scant light. Tilda recognized the shape — the sign for infinity. Her heart leapt back to life, consumed with so much joy she worried of dying, right there in the alley, the victim of too much emotion at once.

"What . . . how?" she sputtered, confusion threatening to destroy her elation at seeing the device.

The man spoke with soothing tones. "Ilsa commanded her posterity to study the sciences, find a way to travel through time. And we've done it. And you, Tilda, *you* are our first mission. I was sent here to get you." He reached

out and gently helped her stand up, his touch bringing a warmth she hadn't felt in a long time.

“Thank you,” she said, too dazed to find any other words.

“Come,” he said, holding out the golden device for her to grasp. “We need you to show us the way.”



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# INFINITY RING™



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MEMORANDUM FROM ARIN

---



## **Tilda's determined to ruin it ALL.**

She's a high-ranking member of the SQ. Due to her fire-bright hair and eccentric outfit choices, we know her as the Lady in Red. And the thing that makes her so absolutely, terribly dangerous is that she has stolen the technology that you perfected and used it to create her own time-travel device: the Eternity Ring. She can be anywhere, at any time. And she'll be aiming for the Breaks — aiming for YOU!

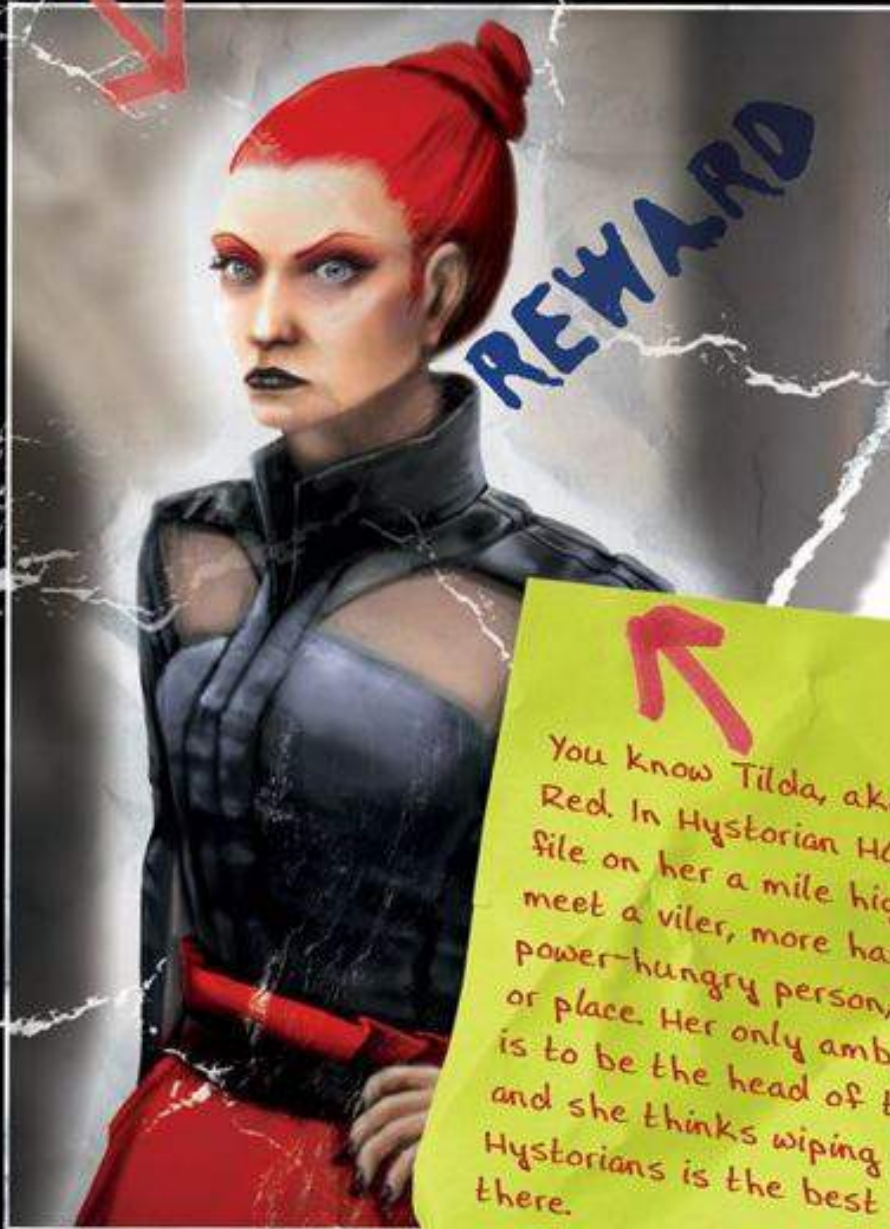
You'll need to jump around through time, revisiting moments where history was broken, making sure she doesn't have the chance to cause any trouble! Breaks you thought you had already fixed? Moments that you know you set right? These are her targets. She's determined to destroy all the work you've done — unless you can get there and stop her.


— Arin



# DANGEROUS

## The Lady in Red



 You know Tilda, aka The Lady in Red. In Hystorian HQ we have a file on her a mile high. You'll never meet a viler, more hateful, more power-hungry person, in any time or place. Her only ambition in life is to be the head of the SQ - and she thinks wiping out the Hystorians is the best way to get there.

Height 5'9" Weight



The GREAT  
**BREAKS**  
in HISTORY

- 1500: Battle at the Great Wall of China
- 1582: Mayhem in Samurai Japan
- 1792: Thieves of the French Revolution
- 1804: Lewis & Clark's Doomed Expedition
- 1814: Redcoats Sack the White House
- 1850: Peril on the Underground Railroad
- 1961: The World War II Deception
- 1966: Assassination in Ancient Greece
- 966: Theft of the Mayan Codex
- 885: Viking Siege of Paris
- 885: Baghdad Burns
- 1258: Voyage to the New World

start here





Look out for the  
**TIME WARDENS!**



She's a  
**NINJA** — a  
strong and  
stealthy rival.







Don't let his fancy airs fool  
you—he's a dangerous one!



Queen Marie Antoinette is  
DEFINITELY working for the SQ!



**WANTED**

This one's  
WILD and  
UNPREDICTABLE.



L  
&  
C



**WANTED**

A REDCOAT – a  
British soldier –  
and a  
DANGEROUS  
Time Warden.





**Dak, up is down, black is  
white. Think in reverse to  
break the code!**

**Gsrh rh gsv ozhg krvxv.  
Kfg gsvn zoo gltvgsvi  
zmw xlnv urmw fh.**

# THE GREAT BREAKS

HISTORIAN'S GUIDE

HISTORIAN'S GUIDE



Only use the infinity thing when you have to doing it too much could have terrible consequences!

Use the dates and locations of all the breaks. We don't know yet which ones these will be!

This is dangerous, but you've already been to these places! You've studied the history. You'll meet the thing. You'll know the deal.

GREECE	336 BC	YUCATAN PENINSULA	628	PARIS	885	BAGHDAD	1258	THE ATLANTIC	1492	CHINA	1500	JAPAN	1582	PARIS	1792	LOUISIANA PURCHASE	1804	WASHINGTON, DC	1814	THE SOUTH	1820	LONDON	1843
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Use your strength  
and cunning!



Defeat SQ foes!

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SQ mastermind Tilda (known as the Lady in Red) has created her own time travel device: the Eternity Ring. She can be anywhere, at any time. And she'll be aiming for the Breaks — aiming for YOU! She's determined to destroy all the work you've done — unless you can stop her.

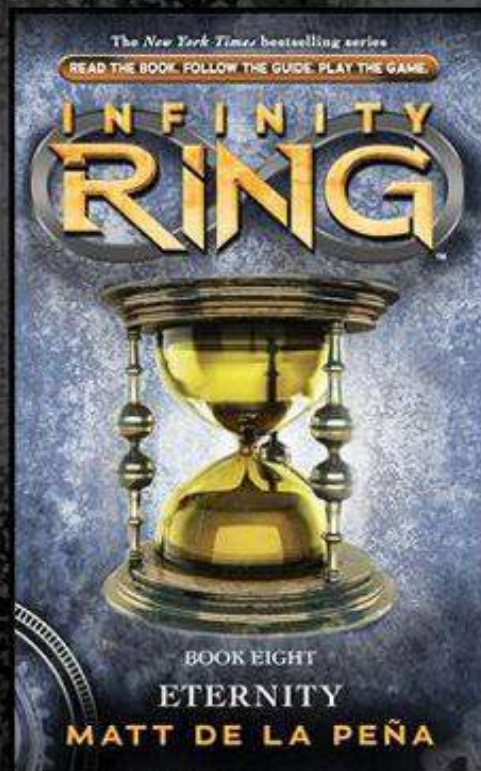
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**Fix the past. Save the future.**

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**ETERNITY**



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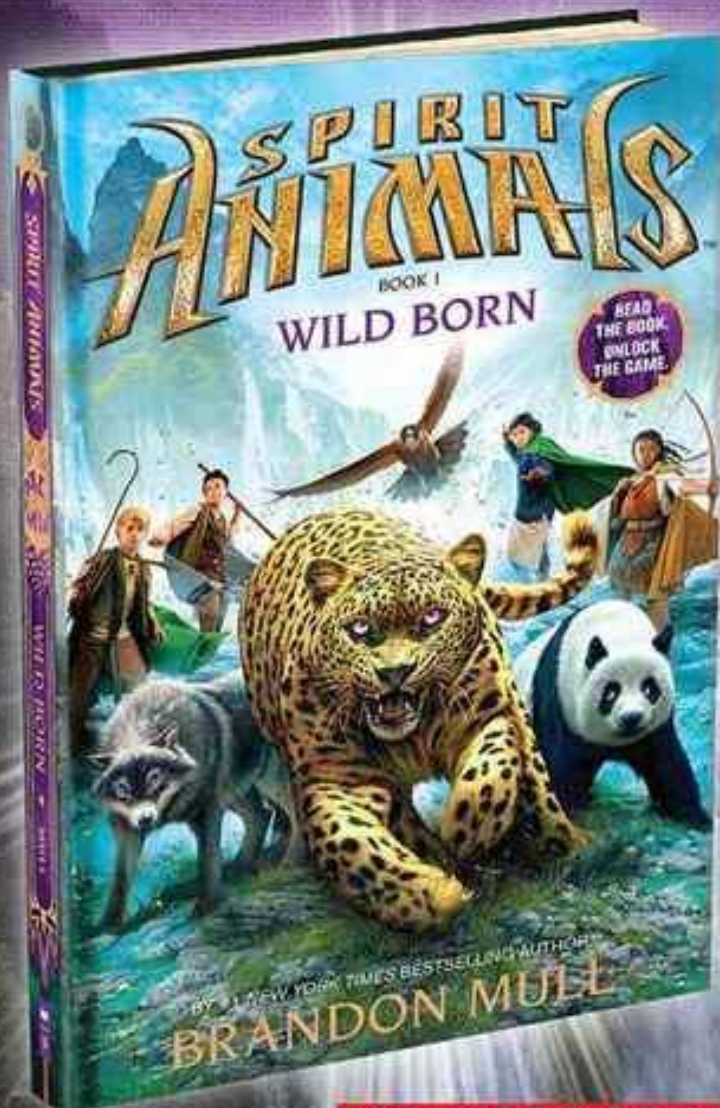
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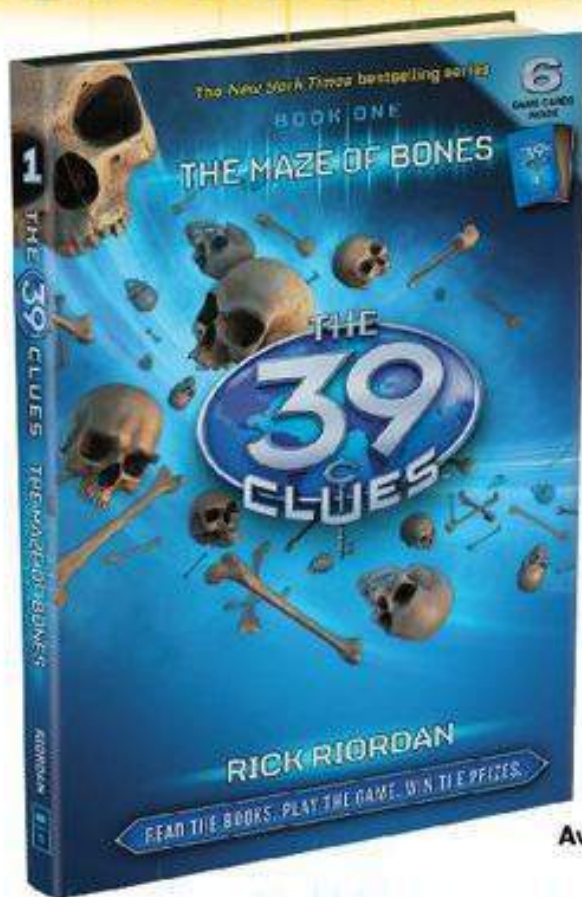
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

e-ISBN 978-0-545-48465-7

Cover illustration by Michael Heath

Cover design by Keirsten Geise

Back cover photography of characters by Michael Frost © Scholastic Inc.

Detail from *Perseus Killing Medusa* by Wilhelm Janson and Antonio Tempesta, 1606,  
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Puzzle rendition of images: Jeremy West for Scholastic

First edition, February 2014

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012

Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1

Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141

Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

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Eternity

Matt de la Peña

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For Ryan Byrne, warrior and reader.

— M.d.l.P.





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## PROLOGUE

THE HEAT from the fire was unbearable as Dak Smyth tried to claw his way out of the elaborate seat belt. Sweat streamed down his face. It soaked his shirt and pants underneath his bulky suit. It even soaked the protective diaper he found himself wearing. He was glad Sera wasn't around to see *that*.

Or even worse, Riq.

But the diaper was no laughing matter. The more sweat that collected in the suit, the more difficult it was for him to move around. He glanced at the fire inching closer to the control panel. Closer to him.

He needed to get out of the way *now!*

But there was nowhere to run. That was the problem with being in outer space. Well, *one* of the problems.

Fire didn't behave the same on a low-gravity spacecraft. The flames didn't shoot upward in a peak the way they did back home. Up here, they hovered around whatever was burning, a deep blue hue.

"Come on!" Dak shouted as the belt slipped out of his gloved fingers again. A drop of sweat ran into his right eye, momentarily blurring his vision. He blinked away the stinging sensation and looked to his left, where the two other astronauts — who weren't much older than him —

were now peering out the window, screaming like little babies. “Uh, little help over here?” Dak shouted.

They didn’t even turn around.

He heard a low buzzing sound, barely audible over the screams, but when he looked all around, he couldn’t identify the source.

When Dak was finally able to free himself, he drifted awkwardly out of the cockpit, toward the wall with the fire extinguisher. He snatched it in his gloves, removed the safety, and aimed the nozzle at the angry blue flame, which now claimed almost a third of the cockpit. Instead of shooting out straight, though, the white substance oozed out at an upward angle, toward the ceiling. He’d forgotten to take into account the lack of gravity.

Dak adjusted his aim accordingly and drew closer to the fire.

But just as he was starting to gain control of it, the guys near the window started screaming even louder, this time diving toward the center of the cockpit, ignoring the flames, holding on to each other.

Dak dropped the extinguisher and bounded over to the window to see for himself.

And suddenly he was screaming, too.

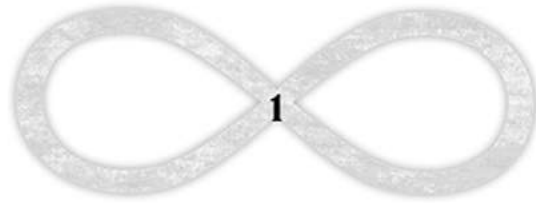
His eyes were bugging out of his head.

A massive asteroid, more than twice the size of their vessel, was spinning recklessly through space directly toward them. . . .





# PART ONE



## Looking to the Sky

THE FORCE of the impact slammed Dak against the floor.

He opened his eyes, gasping for breath, expecting to find a hole torn into the ship's main control center, but all he found was a harmless stick lying on the grass next to his face. He stared at the gnarled thing for a few long seconds, trying to wrap his head around where he was — and *when* he was.

He looked up and found his best friend, Sera Froste, standing over him, grinning. A panting dog stood by her side. It looked like it was laughing at him.

“Oops. Sorry,” Sera said. But the “sorry” sure sounded sarcastic to Dak.

“What . . . happened?” he asked.

“Errant toss,” she said, picking up the stick. “My bad. Nice shoes, by the way.”

Dak rubbed the side of his head and sat up, looking at his new pair of checkered Vans as reality slowly crept back into place. He'd been hit by a stick, not an asteroid. And he'd fallen out of his hammock. “Dude,” he said, glancing over Sera's shoulder, at his parents' barn — the SMYTH FOR MAYOR signs still scattered throughout the large yard. “I just had the

craziest . . . It was like a Remnant, I think. I was on this space shuttle with these two other astronauts, who were both kind of cowardly, to be honest, and out of the blue comes this asteroid. . . .”

“Yeah, that’s not a Remnant, Dak,” Sera said. “It’s called a dream. Happens when you sleep all day.”

Dak was about to argue but lost his train of thought when the mutt began licking the side of his face.

“I think she likes you,” Sera said.

“Gross,” Dak said, nudging the dog away and climbing to his feet. He wiped the slobber off his cheek and forehead with his shirtsleeve. “What’s the deal with the pooch?”

Sera tossed the stick and the dog took off after it. “Long story.”

“Oh, I forgot,” Dak said, giving her a little sarcasm of his own. “We have so many other important places to be right now.” He paused for effect. “Not.”

Sera rolled her eyes and called for the dog. “Here, Zoe. Here, Bella. Come on, Maxie.”

Dak couldn’t help but give Sera a hard time. After fixing all the Breaks in history, thus steering the world away from the horrors of the Cataclysm, they’d been safe and sound at home for over a month now. No more history-saving anxiety. No more running from the SQ’s thugs or being forced to wear crazy ancient outfits like loincloths or togas. No more warping into dangerous situations, the stress of which had probably taken years off Dak’s life of cheese connoisseurship.

In other words, he was bored out of his mind.

Dak and Sera had been arguing for the past two weeks about whether or not to take the Infinity Ring out for a little joyride. All their previous warps had been business trips, Dak argued. Didn’t saving the world warrant a “time vacation” or two? Maybe a quick trip back to ancient Hawaii, before anyone had set foot on the islands? Or what about the grand opening of Disneyland in 1955, where they could ride all the rides

with the original Mouseketeers? Dak told Sera he'd even consider a more science-oriented trip. Anything to keep him from sleeping away the rest of his days in his parents' itchy hammock.

But Sera believed traveling without a purpose was irresponsible. What if they inadvertently altered some minor detail that set off a chain reaction that changed the world forever — after they'd just spent all this time and effort *fixing* it? She even went so far as hiding the Ring from him.

Before falling asleep, though, Dak had come up with a brand-new argument. And it was perfect. If this one couldn't get Sera to change her mind, nothing could. He just needed to find the right moment to spring it on her. After all, "timing" was everything. Dak grinned a little at his clever internal wordplay.

"What's so funny?" Sera asked.

"Nothing," Dak told her, wiping the grin off his face. He thought he heard a subtle buzzing sound, like the one he'd heard in his dream, but when he turned toward the barn, he didn't see anything. "Seriously, though," he said, focusing on Sera again, "give me the lowdown on the canine. She looks a little . . . Do you know if she's had her shots?"

Sera gave Dak a dirty look and whistled for the dog to bring back the stick. "Fine," she said. "On my way home from the store yesterday, I found her sitting in the middle of the street, staring up at the clouds like she was in some kind of trance. And then a car came barreling around the corner. I dropped my groceries and sprinted out into the street and tackled her just in time. Both of us went tumbling to the side of the road. I'm not kidding, Dak, that car whizzed right by my nose."

"See?" Dak said, excitedly pointing at her. "It's not so easy to give up being a hero, is it? It's in our blood now, Sera. It's who we are."

"*You* seem to be doing just fine," Sera fired back at him. "Unless your lying around in a hammock somehow benefits humanity."

"Just waiting for my next call to action, Sera."

Sera gave him a little smirk as she pried the stick out of the dog's mouth and gave it another toss, toward Dak's parents' barn this time, where she had been spending the majority of her free time these days. Dak still wondered why she wasn't spending more time at her place now that she had her parents — even if they *were* sort of weird. Wasn't that all she ever wanted?

Or maybe it was just human nature to take family for granted. Even Dak's own parents, who had seemed so thrilled to have the family back together at first, now spent all their free time campaigning for Dak's mom to become mayor. All he heard around the house was political jargon like *bipartisanship* and *unemployment rate* and *approval ratings*.

"Anyway," Sera said, "now she follows me everywhere I go. Don't you, Fido? Harriet? Stella?"

"I take it she didn't have a tag?" Dak said.

Sera shook her head. "I keep trying out different names, but she doesn't seem to spark to any of them."

"You've just got to find something that reflects her personality. How about Weirdo?" Dak said, realizing this was the most excitement he'd had in weeks. A lost, nameless dog. Possible flea infestation. *Yee-haw!*

"She is pretty strange," Sera said. The dog was now sitting near the barn with the stick in her mouth, staring up at the sky.

"What the heck is she looking at?" Dak asked.

"No idea." Sera put her hands on her hips, still watching the dog. "Every once in a while, she just stops everything and stares into space. Literally. I wonder what's going through her head?"

"Hate to break it to you," Dak said, "but it's not a whole lot. Dogs have brains the size of Hacky Sacks."

When Sera didn't answer, Dak looked into the sky, too, recalling his dream. It had seemed so real. The fire. The asteroid. The slippery seat belt buckle. Even the adult-size diaper. Why would he have a dream

about being in space? Did it mean he'd reached a whole new level of adventure withdrawal?

Dak turned back to Sera, deciding now was as good a time as any to roll out his brand-new time-warp argument.

“So,” he said, “I’ve been thinking a lot about Riq.”



## The Great Disappearance

“WHAT?!” Sera shouted. “I can’t *believe* you’d go there, Dak!” She gave him a look of pure fury and started walking toward the barn.

“Wait,” Dak said, following behind her. “What’d I say?”

Sera stopped suddenly, causing him to run right into her. “That’s a low blow, Dak. Even by *your* standards. Preying on your supposed best friend’s emotions just so you can get your way?”

“I just thought —”

“Maybe you should *stop* thinking.” Sera planted her hands on her hips. “Because sometimes I wonder if it’s *your* brain that’s the size of a Hacky Sack.”

“— you might wanna check on Riq,” Dak said. “We know he’ll be in Anatolia in 333 BC, right after Alexander the Great wins the Battle of Issus. My history books say so. Couldn’t be simpler. How was I supposed to know you’d blow a gasket?”

Sera reached down to pet the dog while continuing to shoot daggers at Dak. It was understandable for the guy to want to dust off the Ring and warp somewhere for fun. Sera wanted to transport herself back into history somewhere just as badly as Dak. Especially given how things had been going with her parents. But it was risky. And irresponsible. And the

fact that Dak would use Riq as a pawn to get her to change her mind . . . that was just wrong.

Riq had sacrificed everything to fix history. He had knowingly uprooted his own family tree for the good of the world and been forced to stay behind in ancient Greece. Treating the Infinity Ring like a toy would be like spitting on his sacrifice.

“Okay, okay,” Dak said, running a hand down his face. “Sorry I brought up Riq. It’s just . . . in two weeks, school starts back up.”

“So?”

Dak cleared his throat. “Sitting in some classroom, surrounded by a bunch of philistines throwing spitballs at one another . . . It doesn’t exactly sound like our ideal learning environment. Not when we could be out there in the field, Sera. Reading about history is great, but we could *live* it again.”

Sera scoffed. “History almost killed us, if you don’t remember. Now, are we done here?”

“For now.”

“Good,” Sera told him, “because some of us have work to do.”

“Ooh,” he said, holding out his hands and pretending they were shaking. “More tinkering in my parents’ laboratory? I bet it’s something *really* important.”

Sera was so aggravated now, she wanted to shout again. But she didn’t. That would be playing right into his hands. Instead she slapped her hip for her *new* best friend to follow her, and they both set off toward the barn.

“And another thing!” Dak called out behind her. “I’d invest in a pack of flea collars if I was you! Because that new mutt of yours is a straight-up pest factory!”

Sera didn’t bother looking back. She and the dog continued inside the barn doors, where she was confronted by her latest scientific failure. It was a petri dish of what was supposed to be tachyon fluid, the most vital



ingredient in time travel. When Riq had smashed to pieces the SQ's Eternity Ring in ancient Greece, Sera had seen the green liquid splatter onto his arms and face. She needed to determine its effects on living cells. But so far all she'd done was create some kind of thick green slime that was totally worthless.

Dak didn't know just how close he'd come to winning her over. Of course she wanted to check on Riq. She worried about him constantly.

Then she heard Dak calling to her from outside.

"Sera!" he shouted. "You gotta come see this! There's a pterosaur in the tree above me! I'm not making this up!"

Sera almost burst out laughing.

"Are you listening to this guy, Olive?" she said to the dog. "A pterosaur? Has he officially lost his mind?" She shook her head, trying to imagine how a prehistoric flying reptile played into what was obviously another strategy to get her to dig up the Ring. Dak was getting desperate.

"Sera, hurry! You're not gonna believe this!"

*He's got that part right, she thought. I'm not going to believe it for a second.* "Say hi for me!" she shouted back. Then she took a deep breath and looked at her last empty petri dish. "Am I ever gonna be able to do this?" she said out loud.

She peeked down and found her dog furiously scratching behind her floppy left ear.



## What's a Hystorian?

WHEN DAK was about four, he got on a huge dinosaur kick and read every single book about prehistoric life he could get his hands on. It fascinated him to no end that for one hundred thirty-five million years dinosaurs were the dominant terrestrial vertebrates roaming the Earth. What an amazing run, considering humans hadn't even been around for five million years.

That's why Dak's heart was slamming so hard against the inside of his chest now. In the tree above him was a real-life adolescent pterosaur. He was sure of it — even though it was technically impossible. *But just look at that long, toothy jaw, he told himself. And that tail. Look at that furry coat* — which he knew was made up of hairlike filaments known as pycnofibers. This wasn't some fake, man-made replica in the Smithsonian. It was the real deal. The pterosaur was young, but Dak could already tell it was going to be huge, which meant it was either a *Quetzalcoatlus* or *Hatzegopteryx*.

Dak caught a whiff of something unpleasant. It wasn't coming from the animal, though. It seemed to be coming from *him*. He looked down at his new Vans, and his heart sank. With his eyes up on the trees, he'd managed to step right in the mess the pterosaur had left behind. He

would have been completely grossed out if it wasn't for one simple fact: *He'd just stepped in dinosaur poop!*

He quickly caught himself. Technically, referring to the mess on his shoes as *dinosaur poop* was incorrect. What he'd meant to call it was *pterosaur* poop. It was a common mistake to refer to pterosaurs as flying dinosaurs when, in actuality, they were their own separate species.

Dak rubbed his eyes to be sure this wasn't some twisted version of his space dream. But when he looked up, the pterosaur was still sitting in the tree above him, moving its head around. And his shoes still needed a good washing.

What the heck was going on?

Dak turned to call for Sera again, but just then the pterosaur flapped its massive wings and started flying away from him, through the treetops.

He took off after it.

The chase through the forest led Dak clear across town. Occasionally the pterosaur would get way ahead of him and he would assume he'd lost it, but then a hundred yards down the trail he'd find it sitting there in another tree. And it would always look down at him before flying off again, like they were playing some sort of prehistoric game of hide-and-seek.

Dak tried to imagine the conversation he would have with Sera later. "So, what'd you do all day, Dak?" she'd ask him.

"Oh, not much," he'd answer. "Just tailed a pterosaur around the forest for a few hours."

As Dak jogged along the path, he tried to figure out how this was even possible. A real, live prehistoric animal in the forest behind his house. Maybe it was some mutated strain that had lain dormant in a cave for millions of years. Or maybe this was the experiment Sera's parents had been so hush-hush about. They were brilliant, and they were supposed to be working with Dak's parents, but ever since his mom had

started campaigning, nobody seemed to have any idea what the Frostes were up to. Cloning prehistoric animals seemed as likely as anything else.

Then another thought occurred to Dak.

What if he and Sera *hadn't* actually fixed all the Breaks in history? What if they'd failed to tie up one or two minor loose ends and over the course of centuries those minor loose ends had become *major* loose ends that had resulted in strange anomalies in the ecosystem, like pterosaurs showing up in the modern world? If that were true, then they'd be forced to warp back into history and fix these loose ends, right? There was no way Sera would be able to argue with *that*.

Dak was so excited, he could hardly breathe — though the breathlessness could've also been the result of ninety straight minutes of continual running.

“Wait for me, pterosaur!” he shouted up at the trees.

And then, eyes fixed on the canopy, he collided with a teenage girl.

They both shrieked on impact and went tumbling to the ground, the girl's books scattering everywhere.

Dak had the wind knocked out of him, but he still managed to glance up at the treetops. His ancient playmate was nowhere to be found.

“What could you *possibly* be in such a hurry about?” the girl shouted, standing up to brush herself off.

Dak opened his mouth to apologize, but quickly realized he knew this girl. It was the young Hystorian who had programmed the Square and helped Dak and Sera prepare for their first mission. “Arin!” he shouted. “What a pleasure! Please tell me you saw that pterosaur flying through the forest!”

“Uh, who are you?” Arin said, looking genuinely confused. “And how do you know my name?”

“It's me. Dak.” When her face didn't show any sort of recognition, he added, “You helped me and Sera before we warped back in time. And

Riq, too. I know you remember Riq. You guys went through, like, Hystorian training together.”

“What’s a Hystorian?” Arin said, crinkling her nose. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. And I’m beginning to think you don’t either.”

Dak started picking up Arin’s books to buy himself a few seconds to think. How could she not know *anything* about the Hystorians? She’d dedicated her entire life to their cause. But he knew the answer. Once they had fixed all the Breaks, they’d also rendered the Hystorian movement unnecessary. Arin didn’t know about the Hystorians because the Hystorians no longer existed.

Dak’s parents had suggested that he and Sera try to ease back into present-day life. “If you try and dive in too fast,” his dad told him, “it’ll be overwhelming. Believe me.” Hence the hours Dak had been spending in the hammock. But now he understood what his dad meant. The world they’d returned to was different from the one they’d left behind, in both big and small ways.

Case in point, Dak thought as he studied the covers of Arin’s books. They weren’t the Hystorian guides or science textbooks he expected. They were teen novels about . . . vampires. He handed them back to her, saying, “Did you at least see the pterosaur? It flew right over your head.”

Arin studied Dak for a few long seconds. “You’re not *seriously* asking me if I saw a flying dinosaur, are you?”

“Well, technically,” Dak said, “I asked if you saw a pterosaur. Two totally different prehistoric animals. The one in question existed from the late Triassic period until the end of the Cretaceous period —”

“Okay,” Arin interrupted, “you’re officially starting to weird me out.” She crinkled her nose again and glanced down at Dak’s feet. “Is that . . . dog poop?”

Dak looked at his shoes and then back up at Arin. “Actually, it’s —”

“If you say it’s dinosaur poop, I’m calling 911.”

“— pterosaur poop.”

Arin set down her books and reached into her bag for her phone.

“It was *there*,” Dak pleaded. “I swear.”

“Oh, it all makes sense now,” Arin said, typing her pass code into her phone. “Those two farmers who reported seeing UFOs a few days ago . . . what they’d actually seen were flying dinosaurs.”

“Again, technically —”

“Look,” Arin interrupted again. “You seem like a nice enough kid. So I’m not going to call the cops, okay?”

Dak nodded, realizing he wasn’t going to convince this version of Arin of anything.

“It’s healthy to have a creative imagination,” she went on, “but it’s probably best if you keep that stuff between you and your little friends, okay? Try finger painting or scrapbooking.”

He looked up at the treetops again. “But . . .”

“Bye, Dan.”

“Dak,” he corrected her, but she’d already spun around with her books and started back down the trail.

Dak watched her go, knowing it was a lost cause. She didn’t know him at all because in this version of the present, they’d never met. And they’d never met because the Hystorians no longer existed.

What *did* exist, however, was the pterosaur he’d seen flying through the forest. He rubbed his eyes again and looked down at his own palms.

He wasn’t dreaming this time.

He was sure of it.

In order to prove it, though, even to himself, he needed to track that animal down.



## Bad Science

“FINGERS CROSSED,” Sera said to the dog as she added a beaker full of isolated electrons to her latest batch of what she hoped would turn out to be tachyon fluid. She stirred the mix, watching closely through her safety goggles for the slight rise of smoke she knew would signify she was on the right track.

If she had done everything right this time, it would only be a few minutes now.

As Sera stirred, she realized why she’d been so annoyed with Dak. On her way to the barn this morning, she had decided to tell him about the sketch she’d found in her mom’s desk drawer a week ago. It looked suspiciously similar to the Infinity Ring . . . or the SQ’s Eternity Ring. Underneath the sketch was the beginnings of a formula Sera immediately connected to time travel.

Sera had slammed the drawer closed that day and hurried into her own room and shut the door. What could her parents possibly want with a time-travel device? She had a feeling it wasn’t anything good.

After that, Sera began snooping in earnest. She found a large stash of hydrochloric acid in the bathroom medicine cabinet. That was unusual. Acid had a lot of legitimate uses, but it could be harmful if used the

wrong way. That was also true of science in general, Sera thought to herself. And her parents were spending a lot of time locked in their lab.

And when they emerged, they were acting downright strange. One night they invited Dak over, and the four of them sat around the table, talking about recent science and history articles and listening to classical music. Everything seemed perfectly normal until her dad had insisted on having an impromptu spitting contest. Even Dak had thought that was weird. He'd run for the hills after the first round.

When Sera returned to her mom's desk drawer the following morning, the sketch and formula were gone.

And so were her parents.

Sera had decided on the walk over to Dak's that a week was long enough. She couldn't keep all this to herself any longer. What good was having a best friend if you couldn't tell him what was bothering you? And her parents' disappearance was definitely bothering Sera. They had worked for Tilda at some point, one of the SQ's most devilish leaders, but they'd never explained why. Or if they'd really had a change of heart. Now Sera couldn't help but assume the worst, that maybe her parents had warped back in time to try to reconnect with the very people she had dedicated her life to fighting.

Too bad Dak turned out to be more concerned with joyriding through history than listening to his best friend.

The dog started whimpering a little, staring out the window of the barn, and Sera reached down to pet her. "At least *you'll* listen to me, right, Lucy? Chloe? Lola?"

Sera remembered that first weekend she was back in the present with her parents. Everything had been so good. They'd started that company with Dak's parents, Solving Quantum Physics. They made the house into a home. They'd even promised to get Sera a puppy. Her parents never came through on that, Sera mused, but she still ended up with a dog. So what if she had a flea or two?



Sera turned back to her latest concoction, but she already knew it was a failure. There definitely would have been signs of smoke by now. And this thick, goopy consistency was all wrong.

She stared at it, baffled.

Normally, she could figure out any science-related conundrum. All it took was a little experimentation, a little tinkering with ingredients. But this tachyon fluid was giving her fits. Maybe she'd lost her confidence. Maybe all that warping through time had done something to her brain.

Then she had another thought. On a whim, she tested the mixture for signs of hydrochloric acid. The results were positive. And a chill settled over Sera as she realized there was only one explanation: sabotage.

Someone had tampered with her equipment.

She threw the entire petri dish into a hazard bag, sealed it up tightly, and took it outside to the trash receptacle. She tossed it on top of at least a dozen other failed attempts and sighed. She almost wished she hadn't figured it out.

When the dog started whimpering again, she knelt down and said, "What is it, girl? Are you frustrated I still haven't guessed your actual name?" The dog barked and Sera realized she wasn't staring up at the sky this time; she was staring at the window. Sera followed the dog's line of vision. What she saw made her gasp.

Hovering just outside the barn's window was a small floating disk. It looked like a miniature UFO built out of pure gold.

"What the . . . ?" Sera stared at it in wonder. When she moved toward it, though, to get a better look, the disk spun around quickly and zipped away.

Sera and the dog both hurried around the other side of the barn and searched all the treetops, but it was gone.

She knew what it was. It was a spy drone.

She'd seen something similar at a tech show she'd attended with Dak a few weeks before their first mission. The man presenting the drone said

it was only a model of what a future tracking device might look like. He estimated that it would be another decade before they were ready for actual production.

So what the heck was one doing hovering over Dak's parents' barn, spying on her?



## Apology Cheese

DAK DIDN'T waste the next morning lying around in his hammock. He rose early and went straight into the forest to look for his pterosaur. He brought with him a backpack with a half dozen skyrockets. The plan was to fire them off in the middle of the forest in hopes that the pterosaur would be drawn to the loud, crackling sound and bright lights.

Unless he was losing his mind, that is.

Dak had to admit, there was a little bit of doubt knocking around in the back of his head. Was he *positive* what he'd seen was an actual pterosaur? It's not like he'd gotten close enough to touch its skin or look into its eyes. What if it was only a robotic replica some tech wizard had created in order to scare kids walking through the forest?

But that wouldn't explain the poop.

The only other explanation Dak could think of was human error. *His* human error. What if all that warping around had altered his brain chemistry to the point that he was no longer able to differentiate between dream and reality? He recalled the look on Arin's face when he'd mentioned the pterosaur. She thought he was crazy. Then again, she also thought he was crazy for mentioning the Hystorians.

After hiking around the forest for several hours, with no sign of the pterosaur, Dak lit his fourth skyrocket. He watched it arc above the trees, into the sky, where it exploded into a glittery mass of colors. Dak had always loved fireworks, but this was different. This was a “pterosaur call.”

He stood there for a good ten, fifteen minutes.

Waiting.

But his prehistoric pal never showed up.

Dak stepped off the trail to rest on a fallen tree trunk. He'd never felt so alone. Arin had no clue who he was, Riq was exiled in ancient history, his parents spent all their time campaigning, and now, he was fighting with Sera.

Just then, as if he'd summoned her somehow, Sera emerged from the bushes. She had leaves in her hair, and she was wearing a backpack he'd never seen before. “*There you are,*” she said, slightly out of breath.

“Uh, what are you doing in the middle of the forest?” he asked, making room for her on the tree trunk. He heard the same buzzing sound he'd heard the day before, near the barn, but this time it seemed to be coming from Sera herself.

*That's weird,* he thought. He definitely needed to get his head checked.

“I was looking for *you,*” she said, plopping down next to him. “I followed the fireworks.”

Dak watched Sera reach into her backpack and pull out a brown paper bag. She held it out to him, saying, “Snack?”

He unfolded the bag and looked inside. It held a beautiful hunk of his current favorite cheese: aged Gouda. He looked up at Sera skeptically.

“What's *this* for?”

“What, I can't bring my best friend a tasty treat?” she asked.

“Of course you can,” Dak told her. “In fact, I encourage it. But . . .”

“What?”

“It just seems a little out of the blue,” Dak said. “Considering you almost bit my head off yesterday.”

“Oh, right,” Sera said, her eyes dropping. “That’s actually the reason I was looking for you. Listen, I overreacted, Dak. I’m sorry.”

“You are?” Dak was more confused by Sera’s apology than his imaginary pterosaur sighting. In all the years he’d known her, she’d told him she was sorry exactly twice.

“Not only that,” Sera went on. “I’ve been hiding something from you, Dak. Something really important.”

That clinched it. There was definitely something strange going on with Sera. But he had a feeling he knew what it was. “Look, Sera,” he said, “if something’s going on with your parents, you can talk to me anytime. Seriously, my door’s always open. You know that, right?”

“What?” Sera said. A grin slowly came over her face, and she let out a laugh. “No, Dak. My parents are perfectly fine. Overworked, maybe, but all that matters to me is that we’re together.”

Dak stared at Sera like she had two heads. “Uh, okay,” he said. “Then what’s going on?”

“I didn’t want to say anything until I was one hundred percent sure it was going to work.” Sera looked over her shoulder and scooted closer. “I put the Square back together, Dak.”

“You did?” Dak said. “I thought you said it was destroyed beyond repair.”

“Yeah, well, I thought so.” Sera looked a little less certain now. “But I’m that good. Anyway, you’re not gonna believe what it said.”

“What?” Dak’s heart started beating faster.

Sera cleared her throat. “We missed one. We missed a Break. And it’s the most important Break of all.”

Dak’s eyes grew wide with excitement. “No way!” he shouted, leaping off the tree trunk. Butterflies flapped around in his stomach. Finally, some real action. “Where? When?”

“Ninth-century China,” Sera said, standing up. “Something went very wrong during that time period, and we have to go fix it.”

Dak wrapped Sera in a bear hug, lifted her in the air, and twirled her around, shouting, “Yes! Yes! I knew there was more for us to do!”

“Dak, please, let me down.”

“My bad,” he said, dropping her on her feet. He watched Sera pull the beautiful Infinity Ring out of her backpack. “Why’s it gold now?” he asked her.

“It’s new and improved,” she told him. “I thought it was time for an upgrade. Now all that’s left to do is program the coordinates.”

“Wait,” Dak said, feeling unexpectedly anxious. This was all he wanted, right? So why was he so hesitant? He cleared his throat and said, “Shouldn’t we, like, tell our parents first?”

Sera punched in the coordinates, saying, “I already left a note in both our houses.”

“Wow, great,” Dak said, nodding. Sera had certainly covered all the bases. All he had to worry about was fixing history again. “So, I take it your parents agreed to watch the flea sack, then.”

“The what?” Sera looked up at him, confused.

“Your rescue dog,” Dak said. “I just wondered who was going to feed that bag of germs while you were gone.”

“Oh. Right. The dog.” Sera looked up and down the trail again. “Trust me, he’s way safer here. My mom will take care of him.”

Dak nodded. “Cool.”

“Grab on,” Sera said, holding out the golden Ring.

Dak gripped one side of the thing as Sera slung her bag over her shoulder. Before she pushed the **ACTIVATE** button, she looked up at Dak and said, “Ready?”

“Ready.” Dak searched the treetops one last time for his pterosaur, but it was still nowhere to be found.

When he turned back to Sera, he found her staring at him with a concerned look on her face. “What is it?” he said, not wanting anything to keep them from their mission.

“Is there something wrong with the cheese I got you?” she asked. “You haven’t even touched it.”

Dak looked down at his hunk of Gouda, still perfectly intact. Only time travel could possibly distract him from eating a piece of high-end cheese. “No, it’s outstanding,” he assured Sera. To prove it, he took a huge bite and smiled as he chewed.

“That’s more like it,” Sera said, her face lit up with approval. “Okay, here we go.”

Dak watched her push the `ACTIVATE` button.

The Ring glowed and shook in Dak’s hand. He barely had time to take a second bite of cheese before the sweet weightlessness of time travel spread through his entire being.



# PART TWO





## The Tang Dynasty

DAK WOKE up on a cot in a small bamboo hut, with a familiar buzzing sound in his ears. He sat up, still half dazed, and looked around. Sera was there, shoving what looked like modern medical supplies into her small leather knapsack. She was wearing a not-so-modern-looking brown cap on her head, strange-looking riding pants, and a white blouse. And there was a small robotic disk hovering in the air near her head.

Dak rubbed his eyes and looked at the disk again, trying to decide if they'd warped into ancient China or the set of some science fiction movie.

"Where are we?" Dak said, stretching out his arms and neck. He pointed at the flying disk. "And what the heck is *that* thing?"

"Oh, you're up," Sera said, emotionless. "There's a traditional robe on the bench for you, next to your backpack. But please stay in the hut until I get back."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She looked up at Dak and gave a fake smile. "Everything's going according to plan," she said. "I just have something kind of important to do right now."

Dak slid off the bed. “Was I, like, asleep for a long time or something?” He was usually so excited to be in another time period, he couldn’t sleep at all.

“You were asleep for over a day,” Sera said, closing her knapsack. “But don’t worry, I picked up the slack like usual. I found some local clothes for us to wear, and I made sure there were no Time Wardens. And just this morning, I learned where to find the local expert in *waidan*.”

“*Waidan*?” Dak said, allowing the word to bang around his bleary brain for a few seconds. “Isn’t that the ancient Chinese version of alchemy?”

“Wow,” Sera said. “You really do know a lot. But I’ve got this one covered. You, Dak, are going to sit here and rest your tired little head. I left some more of that cheese you like on the counter. Eat up and I’m sure you’ll get your strength back.”

Dak saw another hunk of Gouda on the counter, and his stomach instantly grumbled. If he’d been asleep for a full day, it also meant he hadn’t eaten in a full day. Cheese would be the perfect remedy. “But I don’t understand,” he said, turning back to Sera. “I’ve *never* fallen asleep during a warp.”

“You probably had a bug or something,” Sera said, moving toward the door. “Seriously, rest up. I don’t mind taking the lead on this one.”

*How strange*, Dak thought. He didn’t *feel* sick. Not at all. In fact, other than the hunger pangs, he felt great. So why couldn’t he remember anything beyond the moment he put his hand on the Infinity Ring?

“Wait,” Dak called to Sera as she started opening the door. He moved toward the wooden bench. “Just let me throw on this ridiculous-looking robe and I’ll join you.”

“No!” Sera barked.

Dak froze. “What? Why not?” She’d never spoken to him like that before.

Sera's face softened. "I mean . . . I'm late as it is, Dak. Just relax, okay? I need you in top form for the next warp."

"What next warp?"

"I'll explain later," she said. "But trust me, you'll enjoy our next destination *way* more than boring ninth-century China."

Dak let the robe fall back onto the bench. "Boring ancient China?" he said, outraged. "I'm *fascinated* by ancient China, Sera. You know that. Remember when I spent an entire weekend reading the Song Dynasty treatise *Wujing Zongyao*? And I'm still in awe about the four great inventions of the Chinese culture. You remember what they are, right?"

"Dak, I really —"

"The compass, gunpowder, papermaking, and printing," Dak told her. "Four staples of modern life. How could anyone think ancient China was boring?"

"Okay, okay, I get it," Sera said. "You like China. Just . . . be a good boy and eat your cheese. I'll be back."

"At least tell me what *this* thing's all about." The hovering disk seemed to be looking back and forth between Dak and Sera.

"That's ABe," Sera said, cracking a genuine smile this time. "My pet smart-drone."

"Where'd you get a smart-drone?"

"You know all that time I was spending in your parents' barn?" Sera made a clicking sound with her tongue, and the mechanical disk whipped around the small room and then perched on her shoulder. "I was building the world's first mechanical pet." She then snapped her fingers and held open her knapsack, and "ABe" buzzed right inside and powered itself off.

"Whoa," Dak said. "Definitely beats that fleabag you were hanging around the other day. But I thought you said you were putting together the SQuare while you were in the barn."

“This *is* the SQuare, Dak,” Sera said. “That’s what makes the smart-drone so smart. Now, rest up.” She pushed through the small bamboo door and let it swing closed behind her.

“Wait!” Dak called out, hurrying to the door and poking his head out into the bright, sunny day. “Where *are* we exactly? And what Break are we trying to fix? You never even told me.”

Sera stopped near the far end of a large, empty courtyard. “We’re in the capital city of Chang’an,” she said. “During the heyday of the Tang Dynasty.”

“Okay, and . . . ?”

“*You’re* the one who’s supposed to be the history buff,” Sera told him. “Go eat your cheese. I promise I’ll be back soon.” And with that, she disappeared out of the courtyard.

Dak studied the well-groomed trees that lined the perimeter of the courtyard, trying to figure out what had gotten into Sera. Was she really that mad that he’d slept through an entire day? It’s not like he *wanted* to sleep that long. He was sick. She even said so herself. Though he definitely didn’t feel sick now. Groggy, maybe, but not sick.

A sad thought then occurred to Dak as he sulked back in the dark hut. What if Sera wished Riq were on the warp with her, instead of him? Did she think Riq was a more useful history-fixing road dog?

Dak glanced at the cheese she’d left for him. It looked quite exquisite, he had to admit. And he was definitely hungry. But he didn’t have time to eat. No, he had to get out there and prove himself to Sera. He’d show her who was the better Hystorian.

Dak turned his back on the cheese and made a beeline for the robe.



## The Legume Thief

THE MOMENT he heard voices, Dak ducked out of sight behind a large manicured bush. He had a clear view of a nearby courtyard, where a group of men dressed in fancy golden robes seemed to be interrogating a boy no older than he was. The men took turns shouting things at the boy and pointing their fingers at him, but Dak couldn't understand a word they were saying. Warping back in time and across the planet was a little more difficult, he realized, when you didn't have a translation device.

One of the men pointed to the dirt floor of the courtyard at a sack, which was overflowing with what looked to be legumes. Based on how thin the boy was and the poor quality of his clothing, Dak wondered if he'd stolen from the men. Still, he wished he could do something to help. The boy looked like he needed the nourishment much more than the men surrounding him.

Dak decided it was best to leave things alone, though. This dispute wasn't any of his business. And he needed to continue looking for Sera.

He still had no idea what Break they were supposed to be fixing or why they needed to fix it, but if he could find an alchemist, he figured he'd find Sera, too, and she'd explain everything. Leaving him in the hut was a test. She wanted to make sure he was still committed to the

Hystorian cause and not just some lazy scrub who was addicted to hammocks.

But Dak was quickly realizing how hard it would be to gather information in an ancient city when nobody understood a word he was saying. Sure, he could list tons of facts about the Tang Dynasty. Like, he knew it was founded by the Li family, who seized power after the collapse of the Sui Empire. And he knew Chang'an, the city Sera said they were in, was currently the most populated city in the world. But all the historical info at his disposal couldn't make up for the fact that he was lost without Riq's translation device. Or without Riq himself.

Maybe Riq really was more valuable on these warps than Dak. At the very least, Riq had always managed to stay awake.

Dak sighed. He was just about to leave when one of the men suddenly wound up and slugged the boy right in the gut.

Hard.

Dak cringed just watching it.

He didn't know what to do. He couldn't just leave the young thief here to fend for himself. On the other hand, there were five golden-robed men and only one Dak. And these guys seemed nasty. What was he going to do, challenge them to a fistfight?

One of them stepped up to the boy and boxed his ears.

The boy let out a yelp.

Dak remembered the two remaining skyrocketes in his backpack. And the matches. He knew how consumed the Chinese would eventually become with fireworks — which they would use at first to ward off evil spirits. What if Dak introduced fireworks a few decades ahead of schedule?

A third man stepped up to the boy and slugged him in the stomach again. The boy doubled over and coughed up a little blood this time. The men laughed.

Dak had to act *now*.

He took out the first skyrocket, planted the tail in the dirt in plain view of the men, and got his match ready. “Hey!” he shouted.

The five men looked up at Dak, their faces full of confusion . . . and then rage. One of them shouted something Dak couldn’t understand.

“You guys want to see something crazy?” he shouted back. He knew they had no idea what he was saying, but it didn’t matter. His words weren’t the important part. Dak pointed at the bright blue sky and said, “Watch me light up the heavens before your very eyes.”

Two of the men began marching toward Dak, and they didn’t look like they were coming in peace.

Dak quickly lit the match and put his flame under the fuse. He watched it start chewing its way up to the explosive. Just as the two men grabbed Dak by his elbows, there was a loud blast and the skyrocket launched into the sky above the courtyard, exploding into an array of sparkling colors.

The robed men all stared up at the sky in awe. The two who held Dak released him. One of them even bowed dramatically at his feet.

“You like that?” Dak said, grinning. “I have one more if you want it.”

They responded in a language Dak couldn’t understand, of course, so he dusted off his nonverbal communication skills. He held up the final firework and mimed planting it into the ground. Then he showed them how to strike a match and pretended to light the fuse.

All five men were near him now, nodding their heads and speaking in their native tongue. As diversions went, this one had been a big win. But Dak noticed that the boy still hadn’t run away. His feet, Dak then realized, were tied together with rope.

Dak put the skyrocket and matches on the ground and backed away, motioning for the men to try it themselves. When they converged on the firework, Dak hurried over to the boy and dropped to his knees to untie the rope. By the time one of the men turned around, Dak had freed the boy. He handed him the sack of legumes and shoved him toward the exit.

The man took a step toward Dak and the boy, but they were already in a full sprint out of the courtyard. Dak led the boy down a dirt road, through a row of seller stalls and crowds of merchants and people milling around, many of them still looking up at the sky even though the colors had long since fizzled away.

Dak turned around, expecting to see the men chasing after them, but there was nobody.

He slowed to a stop about a hundred yards down the path and stood there sucking in breath. He looked behind them again. Still nobody. Then he turned to the boy and said, “Go on, dude, get out of here. You’re a free man.”

The boy just stood there, though, not understanding a word Dak was saying.

Dak pointed at the dirt path ahead of them. “Take your legumes and go.” He even pulled the hunk of Gouda out of his bag and handed it to the boy. “And take this. You need it more than I do.”

The boy stared down at the cheese, baffled.

“You eat it,” Dak said. “Like this.” He pretended to stuff something into his mouth and fake-chewed.

The boy seemed to understand because he took a bite of the cheese, his eyes immediately lighting up with pleasure. He had a dark birthmark on his cheek that looked like a crescent moon. For some reason, it reminded Dak of his dream about being in space, and the fire, and the asteroid coming right at him. It had been so vivid. If he didn’t know better, he really would think he’d had a Remnant. Or maybe it was a premonition. Was that even possible?

“It’s called Gouda,” Dak told the boy. “And it’s about twenty times more valuable than that firework back —”

Dak was interrupted by a blast in the distance. He looked up and watched the skyrocket soar above the city, bursting into an array of beautiful colors. All of the people nearby were pointing up at the sky,



ooing and aahing. Some started toward the courtyard to see where all the color was coming from.

The boy swallowed another bite of cheese and tried to hand Dak the sack of legumes. Dak shook his head, a thought suddenly occurring to him. The boy didn't understand a word of English, but Dak knew at least one word in the local dialect. "*Waidan*," he said.

"*Waidan?*" the boy repeated.

"Yes," Dak said. "*Waidan*. Where" — he put a flattened hand over his eyebrows, like a military salute, and pretended to be looking all around — "can I find some alchemy?"

"*Waidan*," the boy excitedly repeated three more times. And then he began pulling Dak down the street.



## The Evils of Gunpowder

THE CHINESE boy with the birthmark led Dak to a dark, wooden warehouse shoved right up against a Buddhist monastery. Dak had read about these early monasteries, but seeing one in person was astonishing. It was beautifully landscaped with flowers everywhere, and several monks were walking in silence along a cobblestone path, heads bowed.

Dak felt like he should be tiptoeing out of respect.

The boy unlatched a thick wooden door and led Dak inside, where it was extremely dark and damp. They had to pass through a long, narrow hall lit up by a few dull torches. When they came upon an open door, the boy pointed inside and said in a quiet voice, “*Waidan.*”

“Thank you,” Dak told him, bowing slightly. He didn’t know where the bow had come from but it felt right, especially after seeing the monastery. Dak expected the boy to spin around and hurry his sack of legumes and Gouda back home to his family, but he just stood there behind Dak, nodding.

Dak shrugged and ducked his head inside the door.

He spotted Sera immediately. She was standing next to an older Chinese man, who had to be the alchemist. His dark workroom was set up like an ancient version of Dak’s parents’ barn. There were dozens of

stone bowls filled with powders and plant clippings, and a faint smell of sulfur hung over the room.

Sera and the ancient alchemist were both leaning over an old wooden table, and the man seemed to be explaining something in his ancient Chinese tongue. Sera was nodding, which meant she had to be wearing a translation device. Dak wondered where she got it and why he didn't have one, too.

The man then added a chemical to one of the small stone bowls, which resulted in a minor explosion that made both of them leap back from the workbench.

“*Waidan*,” the boy whispered over Dak's shoulder. His breath smelled like Gouda, which Dak found surprisingly pleasant.

“Yeah, I kind of gathered that,” Dak whispered back.

All the pieces finally came together in Dak's mind. Fireworks. Ninth-century China. An anonymous alchemist toiling away in a dark room. Dak had just witnessed history. This man had just discovered the chemical recipe for gunpowder!

Dak was about to step into the room and congratulate the man when Sera did something he never would have expected. He gasped in disbelief as she took a syringe out of her knapsack and jabbed the long needle into the old man's neck.

Sera caught the alchemist as he collapsed and lay him gently on his back. Then she stood up in front of the workbench and started collecting all the man's stored chemicals, shoving them into her knapsack.

Dak stepped out from behind the door, shouting, “What are you doing?”

“Dak!” Sera said, startled. “What are *you* doing? I told you to wait for me in the hut.”

“I came looking for you,” Dak barked.

The boy raced past Dak to get inside. He pushed Sera away, and held up the old man's head and started speaking to him in a quiet voice.

Dak marched over to Sera and pointed at the syringe in her hand. “What’d you do, kill him?”

“No, I didn’t *kill* him,” Sera said. “It’s a perfectly safe chemical blend that will put our friend to sleep for several hours. When he wakes up, he won’t remember anything about the dangerous elements he was experimenting with.”

Dak looked down at the man, trying to understand what was happening. Things seemed to be spiraling out of control, and he didn’t know what to do. “Why are we here, Sera?” he finally demanded. “What’s the Break we’re fixing? I need to know *now*.”

Sera sighed, shoving the syringe back into her knapsack. “Fine, here’s the situation, Dak. Remember back home, near your barn, when you said you wanted to go back into history again?”

Dak nodded.

“It got me thinking about what a great opportunity we had. Instead of just fixing Breaks this time, we could actually make life better for people.”

“Funny,” Dak said. “I wouldn’t think that involved stabbing old people in the neck.”

“Look,” Sera said. “We can’t do it all the time because, you know, every little change we make creates massive ripple effects throughout time. Which is incredibly dangerous. Blah, blah, blah. But I decided maybe we can alter a few key moments in time for the better. Do you know what this man was doing in here?”

“Of course,” Dak said. “He was inventing gunpowder.”

“That’s right.” Sera grabbed Dak by his shoulders and stared right into his eyes. “And do you realize how much death and destruction the invention of gunpowder ultimately leads to? Think about it, Dak. Guns, explosives, war, horrific acts of terrorism. And we have the opportunity to stop it all right now. Today, Dak. Me and you.”

Sera had a point. The invention of gunpowder would lead, directly and indirectly, to a ton of horrible historical events. But he still didn't see how putting one man to sleep in some dank, ancient Chinese warehouse was going to stop *anything*.

Sera gestured at Dak's shoes. "You stick out like a sore thumb with those checkered Vans, by the way."

Dak glanced at his shoes, then cleared his throat and said, "Someone's going to figure out the formula eventually, Sera."

"Of course they will," she fired back. "But our responsibility is to make sure the inventor is someone more trustworthy, someone who will aim to use this advancement for the greater good. In this case, actually, it's a *group* of people."

"But how do we know —"

"Come on," Sera said, cutting him off. "We have to hurry up and get these chemicals into the hands of the ancient pacifist group known as the AB."

"The AB?" Dak said, more confused than ever. "Who the heck is the AB?"

"Just follow me," Sera said.

Dak looked down at the alchemist again, the man he'd been searching for all morning. He was shocked to find the boy with the moon-shaped birthmark asleep on the dirt beside the old man. Dak reached down and tried to wake up the little thief by jostling his arm, but the poor kid was out cold. He was even snoring a little. All the excitement of the day must have finally caught up with him.

"Dak, let's go," Sera said, tugging at his elbow. "We don't have time to mess around."

As they left the warehouse, Dak found the sack of legumes next to the door. He ran it back inside and lay it next to the boy so he'd have something to eat when he woke up. Before he turned to leave, he saw

that the boy was still clutching a small piece of Gouda in his right hand. He'd eaten almost all of it.

Dak shook the kid again.

Nothing.

He stared at the remaining Gouda again, thinking about how he'd slept through an entire day. And he remembered the cheese was the last thing he'd eaten before nodding off.

"Are you coming?" Sera called to him from the door.

Dak spun around and looked his best friend up and down. He nodded, climbing to his feet. He followed her back through the hall, pretending like everything was perfectly fine when really everything was perfectly messed up. Had Sera given him a bad piece of cheese?

Had she known it was going to make him fall asleep?

It hurt his chest to think that his best friend in the world might be involved in some dubious mission that she was keeping from him. But she had outright lied about there being another Break. What else might she be hiding?



## The AB Pacifists

THEY WOUND through the narrow streets of the city until they came upon a familiar-looking courtyard, where Dak stopped in his tracks. This was the exact same courtyard where he'd freed the birthmark boy.

Which meant . . .

Sera stopped, too, and turned around to face him. "What *now*, Dak?" she said, rolling her eyes at him. ABe, her pet flying robot, buzzed just overhead.

"Uh, you go on ahead," he said. "I'll be, like, the lookout man or whatever. I'll make sure no one tries to mess up the exchange."

"Fine," Sera said, shrugging. She held open her knapsack. "ABe, power off." The robotic disk slipped itself inside, went dark, and Sera continued into the courtyard.

Dak snuck right up to the entrance and hid behind the same bush he'd hidden behind only a few hours earlier, when he had stopped to watch the men in golden robes interrogate the legume thief.

His stomach sank as he watched Sera approach those same men now. They were smiling and waving at her, like they were all old friends. How was this possible? What exactly had he missed while he was out cold in

that hut? If Sera knew these men had just roughed up a starving boy, she wouldn't be acting all buddy-buddy with them.

Or would she?

Dak had no idea what to do or think. It was like his best friend had become a completely different person overnight.

Dak shook his head and tried putting those thoughts out of his head. From his hiding place, he watched Sera lay out the chemicals on a table in front of the men and start speaking to them in the local dialect. He assumed she was explaining how to make gunpowder.

Sure enough, in a few minutes, her concoction produced a minor explosion, just like the one the old man had created in the warehouse. The golden-robed men all took a step back and smiled from ear to ear, and nodded and shook hands.

*Great, Dak thought. These guys won't just be using their fists the next time they torture some kid who tries to swipe a few veggies. They'll be using explosives, too.*

How was this helping people live better lives?

Sera bid the men good-bye and hurried back across the courtyard. She squatted down near Dak, pulled ABe out of her knapsack, and started using it like a tablet now. Dak saw that it was a shiny gold on top, with a full keypad. "Okay," she said, her fingers flying across the keys. "Let me just look up the coordinates and we'll move on to the next place."

"Where'd you get that?" Dak asked her.

"ABe?" she said. "I already told you. While you were asleep in your hammock —"

"Let me guess," Dak said, interrupting her, "you were in the barn creating a flying drone that doubled as a SQuare, and you made it gold for some reason. And you did all this while simultaneously redesigning the Infinity Ring."



“Actually, you have it about right,” Sera said. A snarky grin came over her face and she added, “You’re finally beginning to catch on, Dacky Boy.”

*Dacky Boy?*

Sera had never once called him Dacky Boy in all the years he’d known her. He stared into this girl’s eyes, searching for Sera. *His* Sera. The one he’d grown up with and traveled back in time with and fought the SQ with.

But she wasn’t there.

This Sera was cocky and secretive, and she called him stupid nicknames. The only explanation he could come up with was that she was hurting. Maybe the reunion with her parents had changed her somehow. If so, it was up to him to figure out how to help her.

Sera pulled out the golden Infinity Ring and placed it next to the golden drone.

Dak glanced around the hedge and saw the men playing with the chemicals Sera had just given them. Men in gold robes.

*Strange*, he thought.

“So, where to now?” Dak asked, trying to sound casual.

Sera was busy punching coordinates into the Ring. “Massachusetts,” she said without looking up.

“America?” Dak said, surprised. “What year?”

“You’ll see,” she said, looking up at him. “But I’m pretty sure you’ll feel right at home at Aunt Effie’s farm. I heard her barn even has a hammock.”

“Sweet,” Dak said, playing along.

But in his head, he was repeating, again and again, the name of the farm she’d just mentioned.

*Aunt Effie’s farm.*

*Aunt Effie’s farm.*

Why did that sound so familiar?

Sera stood up, slipping the drone back into her knapsack. “Did you eat the cheese I left for you in the hut?” she asked.

Dak nodded, his knees suddenly going weak.

“That’s odd,” she said, studying him. She reached back into her knapsack and pulled out a smaller chunk of Gouda, handing it to Dak. “You better eat this, too. I can’t have you getting sick on me again.”

“Oh, awesome,” Dak deadpanned. “I was just starting to feel hungry, too.” He took the cheese and took a big bite while she watched him. He left the chunk under his tongue, though, as he pretended to be chewing.

There was no way he was eating anything else she gave him. Not until he figured out what she was up to.

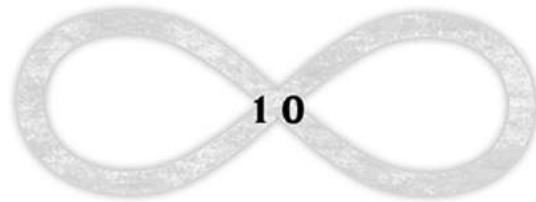
There was a small explosion from the courtyard, and when Sera turned around to look, Dak spit the cheese out into his hand and chucked it into the bushes. He did the same with the rest of the cheese.

When she turned back around, Dak fake-swallowed and wiped his mouth, saying, “Wow, that Gouda was seriously gourmet, but I sure am feeling tired. Don’t worry, though, Sera. I’ll do my best to stay awake so I can help you on the next warp.”

Sera grinned. “I know you will, Dak. You’re so committed to the cause.” She punched a few more buttons on the Ring and told him, “Okay, hang on.”

Dak took hold of the Ring as Sera hit the `ACTIVATE` button. The thing lit up in his grasp, and the world around him began to swirl again, and as Dak was pulled into the abyss this time, he suddenly realized the significance of Aunt Effie’s farm in Massachusetts. It was the site of physicist Robert Goddard’s most notable invention — the first liquid-fuel rocket.

But just as Dak started trying to understand the connection between gunpowder and rockets, he was lost to the darkness.



## The Rocket Launch

DAK STOOD in the middle of a snow-covered field, shivering and staring at what he believed to be the launching frame of the world's first liquid-fuel rocket. It was freezing cold, and he was still shaken up about his time in ancient China, but none of that could stop him from grinning ear to ear. If this contraption was what he thought it was, he knew this day would go down in history. And he was here to witness it firsthand.

Unless he was mistaken.

Dak wanted to confirm with Sera, who was the one who had punched in all the coordinates, but that was impossible at the moment. Sera was still sitting in the snow, rubbing her temples, totally out of it. This particular warp had been especially hard on her for some reason.

"Sera?" Dak said in a tentative voice.

He placed his hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle shake.

Nothing.

Regardless of what he'd seen Sera do in China, he had decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. This was his best friend in the world, after all. He had to trust that there was a method to her madness.

Whatever mistakes she'd made, it was up to *him* to bring her back to the righteous side.

“Sera?” Dak said again.

When she didn’t answer this time, he took a few steps toward the rocket. He wrapped his arms around himself to fight against the bitter cold. His teeth chattered. But none of that mattered right now. He had to get a better look at the contraption in the distance. The rocket itself was thin, and he was still standing a good fifty yards away, but he was sure it was the early work of physicist Robert Goddard. He could tell because the engine was built into the top of the rocket, and Dr. Goddard would only later discover it was better to have the engine positioned near the bottom of the rocket.

Butterflies spread through Dak’s stomach.

If he was correct in his assumption and what Sera had said before the warp was true, then the date was March 16, 1926, and they were on Aunt Effie’s farm in Auburn, Massachusetts. This date was historic because Dr. Goddard’s liquid-fuel rocket would rise forty-one feet in the air, and it would remain in flight for 2.5 seconds. Those numbers might not sound all that impressive, but Dak knew they would change the course of history forever.

“You’re awake?” Sera said, startling Dak.

She walked up behind him, opening up her knapsack. Dak watched her small, robotic disk power on and fly around her head a few times before settling on her shoulder.

“Why wouldn’t I be awake?” Dak asked. His question was a test. He was giving her the benefit of the doubt, yes, but he wasn’t a dummy. He knew it was possible — and even likely — that she had drugged him on purpose. But he still needed to figure out why.

“No reason,” Sera said, staring across the field at the rocket. “I’m just, um, glad you’re feeling better.”

Dak and Sera both watched a group of people dressed in warm coats step out of the farmhouse and begin trudging through the snow, toward

the rocket. He quickly forgot about testing Sera because this was it. Dr. Goddard was about to initiate his history-changing launch.

Sera took Dak by the arm and pulled him out of sight behind a thick, snow-covered tree.

When she let go of his arm, Dak said, “I can’t believe we’re about to see the first liquid-fuel rocket take flight, Sera. This is a huge moment in global history. That’s physicist Robert H. Goddard and his crew chief, Henry Sachs, and —”

“Quiet,” Sera barked at him. “ABe, I need the details of our whereabouts. Volume level one, please.”

To Dak’s amazement, Sera’s robotic disk lit up and made a series of buzzing sounds. “Today is March 16, 1926,” it stated in a quiet, computerized voice. “You are in Auburn, Massachusetts. Across the snow-filled farm, you should see Professor Robert Goddard walking alongside his crew chief, Henry Sachs. Just behind them are Esther Goddard and Percy Roope.”

“Whoa,” Dak said. “It’s like a flying, talking SQuare. You really made that in my parents’ barn?”

Sera shrugged.

Dak wanted to tell Sera that there was nothing her little pet microchip could tell her that he couldn’t. And he was more than a little offended that she would shush him in favor of a tin can.

Dak looked at Sera’s profile. It was the real her on the outside, all right, but it certainly wasn’t her on the inside. And for the first time since running into her in the forest, he wondered if he was actually in danger.

“Sera,” he said, “I need you to tell me what we’re doing here. Please.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” she answered, pulling a syringe out of her knapsack, “but I’m a little busy at the moment.” She pushed the needle into a small vial, sucked up all the liquid medicine inside, and then held it up to her eye level as she squirted out a few drops.

Dak's heart sped up at the sight of the needle. "Is that what you used on the alchemist?"

"How very perceptive of you," Sera answered in an especially snarky voice.

Dak took her by the arm. "Sera," he said, stern but gentle. "What's going on with you? Seriously."

Sera looked at Dak's hand on her elbow and then looked up at him. "Everything's fine," she said, ripping her elbow free. "Strike that. It's *more* than fine. I feel like I'm finally able to do the work I always dreamed of doing when we were hopping all up and down the time stream, doing whatever the Hystorians told us to do. We're no longer just fixing history, Dak. We're improving people's lives."

"You're not really acting like yourself, though," Dak countered. "I *know* you."

"Okay, okay," Sera said, taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly. "You're right, Dak. You've always been able to pick up on my moods."

"Exactly," Dak said, feeling like he was finally getting through to her.

"I'm a little stressed," she said. "I want so badly for the world to be a better place." She paused and looked up into the sky, and to Dak's surprise, a single tear spilled out of her left eye and ran down her cheek. She wiped it away and looked at him.

He saw her in that second.

*His Sera.*

"I just need you to understand what it looks like from my perspective," Dak told her. "You're putting people to sleep with a needle and walking around with a robotic Frisbee on your shoulder. But whatever, Sera. I believe in you. I just want you to let me in on the plan."

Sera took a few more deep breaths, nodding. "You're right, Dak. You really are. I've been so caught up in wanting to do good, I've failed to

include my . . . you know . . . best friend.”

Dak nodded. “Exactly. You know how helpful I am. I don’t mean to brag but I’m way more useful than Riq. You just have to give me a chance.”

Sera motioned around the tree. “This man, Dak —”

“Robert Goddard,” he said.

“Yes.” Sera peeked her head around the tree at the group of people gathered around the rocket. “By coming up with the first liquid-fuel rocket —”

“Three minutes until launch,” the flying can opener said. “The Pacifists will be coming out of the house in two minutes and thirty-five seconds.”

The Pacifists? Dak remembered the golden-robed men in China. Could the computer be talking about the same people? Did they have a time-travel device, too? And who were they anyway? A “pacifist” was a person who didn’t believe in violence, but that hardly described those brutal men.

“By coming up with the first liquid-fuel rocket,” Sera went on, “Dr. Goddard is paving the way for a number of terrible inventions. Think about it, Dak. Missiles, atomic bombs, even nuclear weapons. These are all things that threaten the well-being of everyone on the planet.”

Dak watched Sera prepare a second needle. Her knapsack was lying by her feet, and he saw the tip of the golden Infinity Ring peeking out. “When you said you wanted to help people,” he said, “I was thinking much more specifically. Like, imagine if we were able to stop Adolf Hitler from ever gaining power in Germany. Think about how much good *that* would do. The things we’re doing now are too general, aren’t they?”

“Not in my opinion.”

“Think about it,” Dak said. “Stopping the invention of gunpowder? Stopping rocket technology? These advancements are inevitable, Sera. I

don't see how this is helping anyone."

Sera sighed and glanced up into the sky again. "The universe is so enormous, isn't it?" she asked.

"Uh, I guess so," Dak said. He had no idea what this had to do with anything they were talking about. Was she referring to the dream he'd told her about?

"One minute," the flying Square said.

"Have you ever looked up at the moon and wondered what it would be like if all of humankind started fresh?" Sera looked at Dak. "Maybe we've messed it all up down here. Maybe it's too late."

When Dak looked into the sky, all he could think about was his dream. He felt nauseated remembering how he was trapped in the seat belt. The fire inching toward him. The weightlessness he felt when he bounded over to the window in time to see the asteroid. He wondered if this was what Sera used to feel when she had her Remnants.

"Sometimes, when I gaze at the sky," Sera went on, "I feel like I'm looking into eternity. Do you ever feel like that, Dak?"

He shrugged because he didn't know how to answer. Sera was back to acting weird.

"Try it," she said. "Look up and tell me what you see."

Just as Dak raised his head to look at the sky, Sera lunged at him with her syringe.

He was ready for it, though, and just as the needle came at his neck, he raised his arm to block it. The needle stuck him in the forearm instead, and before Sera was able to drive in all the sleeping agent, the needle broke off in Dak's skin, and he pulled it out and tossed it into the snow. A third of the liquid had entered his arm, at most, but his brain still began to fog over. And his movements felt lethargic.

Sera pounced on him easily, pinning his arms under her knees. "You're going to be okay," she whispered in his ear. "We'll talk it over when you wake up in the USSR."



“U . . . ?” He tried to ask what she was talking about, but he couldn’t. His tongue felt like a dead fish in his mouth. His eyelids drooped.

The fog grew even thicker in Dak’s brain, and he closed his eyes. The dose hadn’t been strong enough to knock him out completely. He pretended, though, to buy himself time to think. Otherwise he was afraid Sera would stick him with her second needle. And then he’d be asleep for days.

There was a commotion near the rocket. And Dak could feel Sera shifting her body to look. He cracked open his eyes, just a fraction. Everything was blurry. And jittery. But he saw a flash of gold from inside her knapsack, just out of his reach.

“Thirty seconds to launch,” the flying disk announced.

Sera turned back to Dak, and he shut his eyes just in time. She slapped him across the face, saying, “You asleep, Dak? Hey, nerd boy? Can you hear me?”

Dak didn’t move or say a word.

He just lay there, barely breathing.

She slapped him a second time, and he still didn’t move, even though his heart was breaking.

“Good,” she said, getting off him. “At least I know how to shut you up now.”

Dak heard her fumbling with her second syringe and then he heard her step out from behind the tree, shouting across the farm, “Tie them up! I’ll handle the rocket myself!”

Dak cracked open his eyes. The world was spinning on him now. He saw tiny stars everywhere and he wondered if they were the microscopic cells that made up the world. He scooted his way to the right a few inches and snatched the Ring from Sera’s knapsack and shoved it down his pants and closed his eyes again, wondering if that’s what death was: You saw all the tiny molecules of life right before the life drained out of you, and then you were gone.

“Okay, Dacky Boy,” Sera said, “you stay here while I make sure the AB Pacifists have everything they need. Then we’re off to the Soviet Union.”

Dak heard Sera tying up her knapsack and he heard the flying SQUARE buzzing away from him and then he felt something warm cover the top half of his body. When he heard Sera crunching through the snow away from him, Dak opened his eyes and saw that she had placed her jacket over him, to keep him warm.

His mind was in such a fog now, it was hard to form a coherent thought. But he knew he was hidden behind a tree so he slowly sat up, sucking in difficult breaths, and felt around him for the Ring. It took him several minutes to remember it was in his pants, beneath his robe. He pulled it out and set it on the snow. He was so exhausted now he had to slap his own face to keep from passing out. He pinched his arm and pried open his eyes with his fingers.

Dak looked at the Ring, and then he looked at the jacket Sera had covered him with.

He was so confused.

Would someone who planned to do him harm really try to keep him warm?

He tried to focus on the Ring. It was spinning in his hand, though he knew it wasn’t really spinning.

Where would he even go?

He felt like he was lost, without a friend or ally in all of history that he could turn to.

But that wasn’t entirely true.

There was still Riq.

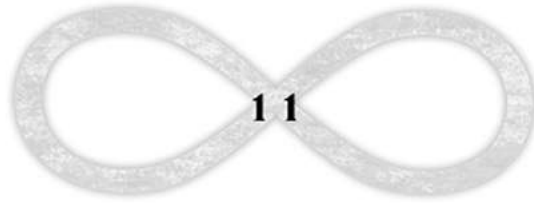
He struggled to program the device, then aimed a shaky forefinger at the `ACTIVATE` button, but he was seeing three of everything now.

He heard the sound of bodies falling in the distance.

Dak had no idea which ACTIVATE was the right one, so he pushed them all, and everything around him began to spin more dramatically and the world went black, like his mind, and he knew it wasn't from the warp this time. It was the drug Sera had injected into his throbbing arm.



# **PART THREE**



## Tamales from Scratch

SERA DIDN'T sleep at all the night she spotted the drone out the window. It wasn't that she was scared of some Frisbee-size hunk of flying aluminum. She just wanted to know who was behind it. And the more she tossed and turned, thinking about it during the night, the more she kept circling back to one disturbing possibility.

Her parents.

She knew they had the tech skills to do it. But did they have the motivation? Wherever they had disappeared to, had they decided to keep an eye on her while they were away? If so, she doubted they were acting out of parental concern. What if they had sent the drone to the barn to find out what she was working on in case it was something they needed to report back to the SQ about?

The idea alone was soul crushing, and Sera didn't want to believe it. But part of her did. At first light, she decided to spend the day combing through every inch of the house, her new dog right by her side, in case her parents had left anything lying around that might give her some answers.

This was *not* what Sera had in mind all those years she'd dreamed of having her parents in her life. *Be careful what you wish for*, she

remembered her uncle always telling her. But he was talking about the dangers of scientific advancement. A saying like that should *never* apply to someone's own mom and dad.

Sera had already searched all the bedrooms and both bathrooms and the shed out back and the living room and the kitchen, and she still hadn't found anything too suspicious. The only thing that was remotely questionable was the wax paper she found wadded up in the garage trash can. It was the paper her dad had used during the strange spitting game he'd insisted they all play during their dinner with Dak. There were two holes in the paper, like her dad had cut out the parts where their saliva had landed.

"Ew," she said, plopping down on the couch. "What would he want with somebody's *spit*?"

The dog barked in agreement.

Sera was just about to start rifling through the downstairs bookshelf when the doorbell rang. She stood up, crumpling the wax paper, and hid it behind the couch.

The bell rang a second time and as Sera started across the living room, the dog still following closely behind her, a familiar voice called out from the other side of the door.

She undid the chain lock and pulled open the door. "Dak?"

"Sera!" he said, a little too excitedly. He was wearing a backpack she'd never seen, and the big grin on his face put her on guard. He pushed past her into the living room, saying, "I'm glad I found you, Sera. We have so much to talk about."

"We do?" Sera said.

"Of course we do." Dak knelt down to pet the dog. "Hey, buddy. You missed me, didn't you?"

The dog growled.

Sera watched this odd exchange, feeling about as confused as she'd ever been. "I thought you *hated* my dog," she said.

“Not at *all*,” Dak said, standing up.

“But yesterday —”

“She’s a survivor, Sera. Like me and you.” When Sera didn’t say anything right away, Dak added, “We will always accomplish what we set out to accomplish. You know that, right?”

“I know you’re acting like a freak,” Sera told him. “What’s with the backpack?”

“I’m glad you asked,” he said, walking over to the couch and sitting down. He pulled the backpack off his shoulder and unzipped it. “I brought you a little gift. Three gifts, actually.”

Now Sera had moved beyond confused. She was *concerned*.

Dak had never, ever brought her a gift out of the blue like this. Which meant it had to be another ploy to get what he wanted. What else could explain Dak being so . . . nice?

Sera took the box he was holding out to her and lifted off the top. She was shocked to find three brand-new petri dishes wrapped in delicate tissue paper. She looked up at Dak. “How’d you know I needed these?”

Dak tilted his head. “Sera, it’s pretty obvious things haven’t been going so well in the barn. The trash is about ten feet away from my hammock, remember?”

Sera pictured all her batches of failed tachyon fluid. Maybe Dak was a little more perceptive than she gave him credit for.

Dak then pulled a book out of his bag. “I also brought this for you, but it’s for later.”

Sera saw the title: *The Principia* by Isaac Newton. A book that had changed her life in fourth grade. When she reached for it, Dak quickly shoved it back in his bag.

“Like I said,” he told her, “that’s for later. But *this* isn’t.” He then produced a brown paper bag. “I cooked a little something for you, too. It’s a sort of peace offering. I really shouldn’t have brought up Riq yesterday, Sera. I’m sorry.”

“Okay, this is getting to be a bit much,” Sera said, unfolding the top of the lunch bag. “Petri dishes. One of my all-time favorite books. And now”— she looked inside — “shut up, are these tamales?”

“Traditional *Mayan* tamales,” Dak corrected her. “I made them from scratch.”

Sera sniffed inside the bag of tamales. They actually smelled legit. “Okay, what’s the catch?” she asked.

“Just take a bite,” he told her.

Sera did just that, nodding as she chewed. “Wow, Dak,” she said with her mouth still half full. “This is really, really good. I’m shocked.” She swallowed and said, “Seriously, though, what’s the catch?”

Dak took a deep breath. “Well, actually —”

“I knew it,” Sera interrupted.

The dog growled at Dak and showed her teeth.

“Trust me,” Dak said. “You’ll want to hear this. I have some important information about your parents.”

“My *parents*?” Sera’s stomach sank.

Dak nodded. “They’re gone, aren’t they? They’ve been gone for a while now.”

Sera set down the bag of tamales. “How’d you know that?”

“You think I just sit around all day, but I work, too, Sera. In fact, yesterday I spoke to Arin. You remember her, right?”

“Of course I do,” Sera told him. “But I doubt she remembers us.”

“She *absolutely* remembers us,” Dak said. “Arin works for a small, secret division of the Hystorians. And you’re not gonna believe what she told me.”

“What?” Sera said. “Tell me!”

Dak looked around the room, like he was making sure they were the only ones around.

Sera’s dog snapped her teeth a few times and snarled. “Easy, girl,” Sera said, reaching down to rub her furry head.



“According to Arin,” Dak continued, “we actually *haven’t* fixed all the Breaks. We have to go back to seventeenth-century Italy, to the trial of Galileo.”

Sera gasped. Galileo was one of her heroes. His guiding principle was to follow knowledge wherever it led. No matter what. And that’s the exact kind of scientist Sera had always wanted to be.

Dak nodded. “And then she gave me *this*.”

Sera watched Dak pull out the Infinity Ring. Only it wasn’t silver, like the one she’d hidden. It was gold. “All right,” she said, feeling anxious all of a sudden. “And what does any of this have to do with my parents?”

Dak pointed at the tamale. “Eat up and follow me. I’ll show you.”

Sera didn’t know what was happening or what to think. She just knew she had to find out the truth. So she popped the rest of her tamale in her mouth and followed Dak out the door. The dog followed, too, hackles up.

When they arrived at the tree house Dak and Sera used to hang out in, back when life was simple, Dak nodded at the ground and said, “Go ahead, dig it up.”

She was shocked he knew where she’d hidden the Infinity Ring. She lifted a few weeds and dug with her hands until she came to the tin box she’d buried weeks before. She lifted it out and opened it, and her stomach dropped. It was filled with worthless rocks.

The Infinity Ring was gone.

Sera looked up at Dak. “My parents did this?”

He nodded. “Have you seen a drone hovering around the barn lately?”

“I have!” Sera said. “Just yesterday! Please don’t tell me . . .”

“Your parents, Sera.” Dak shook his head sadly. “They’ve been spying on us. I’m sorry to be the one who breaks this to you, Sera, but

they still support the SQ agenda. They've gone back to the trial of Galileo to rewrite history . . . and bring the SQ back in a big way."

Sera's breath caught. She knew her parents were up to something. But this was far worse than she'd imagined.

"I understand how tough this is to hear," Dak said. "But they have a huge head start on us. We have to warp back to the trial right away." He unfolded a piece of paper and handed it to Sera. "Here are the coordinates Arin gave me. I'll let you do the honors."

Sera felt devastated as she took the gold Infinity Ring and the piece of paper. She loved her parents, but she couldn't let them get away with undoing all the work she and Dak and Riq had done.

She programmed the golden Ring with a heavy heart and watched the computerized screen flash their destination: ROME, JUNE 22, 1633. Right before the Age of Enlightenment. But she couldn't even be excited about it.

"Grab on," she told Dak.

He gripped the far side of the Ring and nodded to her.

Sera hit the *ACTIVATE* button, but just as everything was starting to spin, she saw her nameless dog reach a paw up for the Ring, too, barking, and the three of them were sucked into the dark abyss together.



## Scientific Superstar in the Flesh

IT WASN'T the dog's slobbery tongue lapping across Sera's face that woke her out of a dead sleep. It was the dog's awful breath. Sera's nose instinctively wrinkled and she popped open her eyes and nudged her dog's cold snout out of the way. She sat up, wiping her face on her shirtsleeve, saying, "No face licking, Ginger. Or Dixie. Or whatever your name is."

When the dog lowered her head in shame, Sera hugged her tightly and added, "I'm glad you came with me, though. We're a team now."

The dog licked her face again, and this time Sera let it slide.

Sera got up from her simple cot to investigate her surroundings. She was in a small, dark room with heavy beige curtains, white walls, and dark wooden floors. Other than the large, gaudy cross above the door, the room was incredibly plain.

Was this really seventeenth-century Rome? What happened to all the . . . stuff?

And why was she so exhausted?

Sera heard people shouting in Italian outside so she went to the window and brushed aside the curtains to look. There were two groups

of men in what looked to be some kind of town square. They were arguing and pointing at each other. One group was dressed in the black robes that she knew Roman Catholics called cassocks. They had matching black hats. The other group was dressed in more modern-looking trousers and long shirts. They looked like students.

And then Sera spotted the smallest of the trouser-wearing crew. He was standing right in the middle of the action, shouting louder than anyone else and in perfect Italian.

Dak.

Sera threw on the clothes Dak had clearly left for her and rushed out the door, the dog following closely behind. She pushed her way into the crush of people and tugged at Dak's arm. "What are you doing?" she scolded him. "You're going to get trampled out here."

"Sera?" Dak was looking at her like he'd just seen a ghost. "Why aren't you still . . . sleeping?"

The argument around them escalated, and Sera realized why this felt so different from any of their previous warps. Because she wasn't wearing a translation device, she couldn't understand a word anyone was saying.

Dak let her pull him aside. Once they were a safe distance away from the two clashing groups, Sera asked, "How long was I asleep? And why didn't you wake me up?"

"Only a few hours," Dak said. "You seemed sick or something, so I thought it was best to let you rest."

The dog growled at Dak and showed her teeth.

Sera agreed with the dog: Dak was being sketchy. She narrowed her eyes at him. When was the last time he'd left her alone just because she was a little under the weather? *Never*, that's when. Dak didn't pay attention to stuff like that. He had to be up to something.

"You should have woken me up," Sera snapped. "What are we doing here? What have I missed?"

Dak shouted a few more lines of Italian at the men in black cassocks before turning back to Sera. “Are you familiar with the heliocentric theory?” Dak asked her.

“Duh,” Sera answered. “The heliocentric theory states that the Earth revolves around the sun — not the other way around. I wrote about it on my blog two years ago. Remember? You left a comment suggesting that the Earth revolves around cheese.”

“Oh,” Dak said. “I mean, I forgot. Anyway, Galileo has been promoting the heliocentric theory all over the place lately, and now he’s been called in for an inquisition.”

“Right,” Sera said, recalling the significance of the date she’d entered into the Infinity Ring. “This is the day they find him guilty of heresy, right?”

Dak nodded excitedly. “It’s history in the making, Sera. In order to stay out of jail, Galileo is going to be forced to publicly declare that he was mistaken —”

“What a joke!” Sera shouted. “All of Galileo’s research is supported by the most powerful telescope available at the time. He *proved* the Earth revolves around the sun. It’s one of the most absurd setbacks in the history of scientific progress!”

Dak looked genuinely frightened by her anger.

“Sorry.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You know how I get when it comes to this stuff.”

Dak took a step closer and told Sera in a much quieter voice, “You’re right to be upset. In history as we know it, the cardinals rule against Galileo. We’re here because we can’t let that happen.” He opened up his backpack and pulled out the copy of Isaac Newton’s *The Principia* and handed it to her. “How familiar are you with this book?”

“Are you kidding?” Sera said. “I basically have it memorized.”

“Good,” Dak said, “because you’re going to use it to prove Galileo’s position is valid.”

“What?” Sera said. “How?”

“I’ve already set everything in motion for you,” Dak told her. “You just have to trust me on this one.”

But that was the problem. Sera didn’t know if she *could* trust Dak anymore. He’d been acting strange from the moment he’d shown up at her parents’ house. And now there was this look in his eyes she didn’t recognize. And there had to be a reason her dog was still snarling at her best friend and emitting a low growl. Animals sensed when people were hiding something.

Sera would have started drilling Dak with additional questions if at that exact moment, everyone in the town square hadn’t gone utterly silent.

Sera looked up and saw a group of armed soldiers escorting a man in shackles toward the courthouse.

A buzz of voices rippled through the square as the shackled man was led right past Sera and Dak. He looked up and met eyes with Sera, and Sera’s heart began pounding so fast, she wondered if this was what it felt like to have a heart attack.

This was her idol, Galileo.

In the flesh. In chains.

She actually had to remind herself to breathe.

When the man was led through the doors of the courthouse, Dak tapped the book in Sera’s hands. “The entire course of history is counting on you,” he said.

“No pressure,” Sera mumbled to herself, still staring at the doors of the courthouse. She swallowed hard, remembering that ten cardinals would rule Galileo guilty. How was she going to convince them that the Earth revolved around the sun when they were so set in their ways, they had refused to even look through Galileo’s telescope?



## The Trial

SEVERAL HOURS later, Sera found herself standing outside the courtroom, where she and Dak argued with a dozen armed guards who refused to even let them inside. Actually, it was just Dak doing the arguing. Sera couldn't understand a word anyone was saying, and the daggers she was staring at the men didn't seem to be having much of an effect.

Sera had spent the day in her small room with her dog, reviewing Isaac Newton's masterpiece, *The Principia*. Only it wasn't considered a masterpiece in seventeenth-century Rome because it had yet to be written. Isaac Newton hadn't even been born yet. So every sentence in the book would be unfamiliar to the cardinals. Sera couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Of course, it was a moot point if Sera couldn't even get into the courtroom. She watched as Dak went from arguing in a calm, rational way to shouting, but the guards continued shaking their heads and shooing Dak and Sera away.

"What now?" Sera asked Dak when he turned his back on the men, shaking his head, too. The trial was nearly over.

"I don't understand why they're not here yet," Dak said, looking over Sera's shoulder.

“Who?” Sera wanted to know. “And what did you just say to the guards?”

Dak turned to Sera, his face red with anger. “They don’t know who they’re dealing with, Sera. I’m tight with this pacifist group, the AB. As soon as they find out I was mistreated, they’re going to —”

“Who’s the AB?” Sera interrupted. “How come I’ve never heard of them?”

Dak’s face grew uncertain, like he’d just let something slip that he’d meant to keep to himself. “It’s just this group that helps, you know . . . I met them while you were asleep. They’re the ones who hooked us up with the clothes we’re wearing.”

“But who *are* they?” Sera asked. “And why are they helping you?”

Her dog barked at Dak and continued her low growling.

“Maybe I’m just a likable guy,” Dak said, looking down at the snarling dog. “Right, girl?”

The dog snapped her teeth at Dak. This time, Sera actually had to hold her dog back. Before she could ask Dak any more questions, a group of four robust men dressed in black cassocks approached the guards. One of them waved to Dak and said something in Italian.

“Thank heaven,” Dak responded.

“What?” Sera asked. “What is it?”

Dak turned to her. “They’re going to take care of us.”

“Is it the AB group you were talking about?”

Dak nodded.

As the men spoke to the guards in deep, authoritative voices, Sera studied the gold trim of their cassocks. She’d never seen a priest wear gold before. It almost seemed too flashy for church. It reminded her of the gold Infinity Ring they had used to warp here, and she wondered if Arin back home had anything to do with the AB. Maybe the smaller Hystorian group had taken on a different name.



Sera was shocked when the guards suddenly stepped aside and allowed the men in gold-trimmed cassocks to open the doors to the courtroom. The AB men bowed to Dak, which confused Sera even more, and waved them inside.

And then something happened that she did not expect at all. Out of nowhere, she felt faint and almost passed out. She had to go down on one knee so she wouldn't fall forward and smash her face on the ground. There was a weird ringing in her ears, too, and for a few seconds her mind went blank. But then she was fine again, like nothing happened.

"Come on," Dak said anxiously. "They're just about to issue their verdict. You do your thing, and I'll keep an eye out for unwanted guests." He stopped her near the back row of chairs and transferred the translation device, which was gold like the Ring, from his ear into Sera's. She felt the translator in her tooth, which Riq had inserted months ago, spark to life once the earpiece was in place. Dak winked at her — which was weird — and stepped back into the shadows just as one of the cardinals slammed his gavel against the table.

"We have our verdict," the man said in Italian.

Sera could understand him perfectly now. It was a little gross to think of Dak's earwax mixing with her own, but it was the only way she'd be able to present her argument.

"By majority vote," the cardinal went on, "we find the defendant, Galileo Galilei —"

"Wait!" Sera said, leaping out from behind the last row of chairs.

Everyone spun around to look at her. The courtroom was packed. She stepped forward, trying to appear confident, and stated, "Galileo is right about the heliocentric theory, and I can prove it!"

Two of the guards came rushing into the courthouse and took Sera by her arms, but one of the cardinals stood up and shouted, "Let the girl speak!"

Sera saw that while the rest of the cardinals were dressed in traditional cassocks, the robe of the man who'd just spoken up had gold trim, like the men outside. She wondered if he was part of the AB group, too.

When the guards released her, Sera walked down the aisle toward the front of the proceedings, feeling as nervous as she'd ever felt in her entire life. She scanned the crowd for her parents. Hadn't Dak said they were here somewhere? Then she saw Galileo was looking right at her. It was a dream come true to be able to defend him. But that dream would quickly turn into a nightmare if she failed.

One of the guards tried to take the dog out of the courtroom, but the cardinal wearing the gold trim came to Sera's defense a second time. "Leave the dog alone," he said. Then he turned to Sera. "Please, go on, young lady. Tell us why you believe Galileo is correct in his assertion that the Earth does indeed revolve around the sun. As you know, the church contends it's the other way around."

Sera stepped in front of the row of cardinals and cleared her throat. She looked back at Galileo. She could see it in his eyes: He was counting on her. But what she was about to do was more complex than he knew. Aristotle was the one who helped establish the geocentric theory — which stated that all the other planets, and the sun, too, revolved around the Earth. Sera felt really weird about proving the founder of the Hystorians wrong about something. But hadn't Aristotle also claimed that science and knowledge were ever evolving?

Sera's dog trotted up to her and sat down, her tongue lapping out the side of her mouth. Sera petted her and took a steadying breath. She then turned her attention toward the cardinals. "Are any of you familiar with a man named Sir Isaac Newton?" she asked.

The men all shook their heads.

"That's because he doesn't live anywhere around here," Sera said. "And he refuses to travel to Rome. But a few days ago, I had the good

fortune of speaking to Mr. Newton. And I believe some of the things he told me will change astronomical science forever.”

When the men all leaned forward, seemingly intrigued by her opening, Sera knew she'd have just this one chance to explain it in a convincing manner. And she knew she'd have to keep it simple enough for everyone in the entire courtroom to understand.

She took another deep breath, let it out slow, and began.

She told the men how Isaac Newton was walking in a garden one day when he witnessed an apple falling from an apple tree. It was a normal-enough occurrence, sure, but it got him to thinking. Why had the apple fallen toward the ground instead of falling sideways or rising straight up in the air? Why was the fruit seemingly attracted to the ground? And why did it happen the same way every time?

When Isaac Newton thought more about this event, Sera told the courtroom, he had an epiphany. When released from any height, all earthly objects fell toward the ground. He even tested his theory. And then he took it a step further, suggesting that *every* object draws other objects toward it, but the larger and heavier object always possesses the more powerful drawing power. Therefore the apple will always fall toward the Earth instead of the Earth rising up toward the apple.

To state it simply, Sera explained, the Earth is a million times heavier than an apple, therefore its drawing power is a million times stronger.

Sera swallowed and looked around the room.

Dak was nowhere to be found.

But Galileo was nodding in support. And the cardinals were all still listening.

She went on.

“Sir Isaac Newton then applied this idea in a more universal way,” she told them. “If the sun is a million times larger and heavier than the Earth, which Mr. Galileo has observed in his extensive telescopic

research, then isn't it going to have a draw that is a million times stronger?"

When nobody said anything, she answered her own question. "Of course it is. And that's what causes the Earth to revolve around the sun instead of the other way around. It has nothing to do with politics or religion and everything to do with science."

A rumbling of voices started spreading through the courtroom.

"Furthermore," Sera said, "Isaac Newton believes the heliocentric theory is supported by his laws of gravitation, which I've hand-copied for all of you today. So you can see for yourselves." She began handing each cardinal a piece of paper with Newton's three laws of motion. "However, this doesn't mean the sun stays in a fixed position either. So you're both right in a way. All planetary masses are in constant motion."

The buzz inside the courtroom swelled even more, and one of the cardinals had to slam his gavel on the table to get everyone to quiet down.

When Sera was done passing out the pieces of paper to all the cardinals, she saw Galileo wave her over. Her heart sped up as she approached him. "Yes, sir?" she said tentatively.

"That was really something," he said. "Do you mind if I take a look at one of those?"

"Of course," Sera said, handing over her last copy of Newton's gravitational laws. She watched Galileo study the words and equations. She could almost imagine his great mind doing somersaults inside his skull.

After a couple of minutes, he looked up and said, "This is groundbreaking, young lady. I'd like to meet this Sir Isaac Newton fellow immediately. Can you arrange it?"

Sera's eyes grew wide with surprise. "Oh, well . . . he's really hard to reach at the moment, but —"

Luckily, she was interrupted by one of the cardinals, who was pounding his gavel again. “All rise,” he announced. “In light of this new testimony, we’ve decided to suspend our decision until an academic committee can properly study this new theory called . . .”

“Gravity,” Sera said.

“Yes, gravity,” the man said. “Galileo is free to go.”



## The Kick that Ended a Friendship

SOME PEOPLE in the courtroom booed. Others cheered. And then a group of people near the back began chanting Galileo's name in this strange, drawn-out way that Sera thought would be more appropriate at a professional sporting event than in a courtroom.

“Ga-li-le-o!”

“Ga-li-le-o!”

“Ga-li-le-o!”

Sera was surprised to see the man pointing up into the crowd and pumping his fist. He jumped up on one of the tables and shouted, “It moves! I'll repeat it until my dying day! The Earth moves, do you hear me? It moves!”

This proved to Sera she had altered history forever. Instead of having to rescind his belief in the heliocentric theory, Galileo was shouting it from the rooftops. Or at least the tabletops. He even went over to a group of young women and kissed all their hands in an incredibly flirtatious way.

*Interesting, Sera thought. Galileo is a player.*

She shook the thought from her head and decided to go in search of Dak. It was probably a good idea to get out of the courtroom before anyone figured out that Isaac Newton didn't even exist yet. She looked all around the crowded courtroom but didn't see Dak anywhere.

Her dog was gone, too.

She broke into a cold sweat and began walking up and down each row, searching for them. She squeezed through a large group of celebrating students, deciding to try behind the stage. The first thing she saw was the group of men in gold-trimmed cassocks, standing around in a circle.

And then she noticed what was inside that circle.

Her dog.

"Again!" someone called out, and she knew right away it was Dak's voice. One of the men took a couple of steps forward and kicked her dog right in the ribs.

She howled in pain.

"What are you doing?!" Sera shouted.

Dak spun around. He was wearing his green backpack, like he was already prepared to leave. "Sera," he said, "I thought you were with Galileo —"

"I'm right here!" she shouted back. "Obviously." She was so angry, she marched right up to Dak and pushed him onto the ground. The top of his backpack flew open and all of its contents went sliding across the floor, including the golden Infinity Ring and the bag full of Mayan tamales.

Dak looked up at Sera and then turned to the men and shouted, "Seize her!"

Sera's mouth fell open.

Had Dak really just ordered them to capture her — in flawless Italian?

As the men in gold-trimmed robes approached her, Sera had an epiphany of her own, not unlike the epiphany Isaac Newton had after watching an apple fall from an apple tree.

The gold Infinity Ring.

The gold-trimmed cassocks.

The gold translation device.

The cardinal who was so anxious to hear her testimony.

And most important, the tamales Dak had fed her. The ones that had made her fall asleep on the job. Was it possible that he'd laced them with some kind of sleeping pill?

This wasn't the Dak she'd known all her life. Someone had brainwashed him, flipped him onto the side of evil. She didn't understand who could have done this or how, but she trusted her instincts.

She was on her own now.

One of the AB Pacifists reached out to grab Sera's arm, and she ducked. But he managed to catch the side of her head, ripping out Dak's gross, earwaxy translation device. *Good riddance*, Sera thought as she slipped beyond the reach of the rest of the men and hurried toward the back exit, pausing only to scoop up the gold Infinity Ring.

She booked it out of the courthouse.

Sera raced back around the building and across the town square, her poor dog limping alongside her and whimpering. The two of them kept running until they were at the end of a quiet, vacant road, where Sera knelt down behind an empty carriage, out of breath, and tried to think. She could hear a very vocal crowd coming her way, but she couldn't see them . . . yet.

She stared at the golden Infinity Ring. If it were just Dak, she would try and talk to him. Maybe she could bring him back to his true self. But that was impossible while he was surrounded by thugs. No, she'd have to warp somewhere without him, and she'd have to do it now.



But where would she go?

Home wasn't an option. Her parents were gone, and even if they were sitting on the couch right now, waiting for her return, she didn't trust them. For all she knew, they were the ones who'd turned Dak against her.

Finally, it dawned on Sera. The one person she knew she could trust was Riq.

But where would she go to find him?

"There she is!" someone shouted in the distance.

Sera looked up and found Dak racing toward her, followed by his posse of gold-wearing priests. "Stay right where you are!" he shouted as he and his men closed in on her.

Suddenly, it hit Sera like a ton of bricks. She'd go back to southern Anatolia in 333 BC, just after the Battle of Issus. Riq would still be there on orders from Alexander the Great. Dak had said as much himself.

But was that before or after he'd turned against her?

There was no time to run through all the possibilities in her head. She had to act *now*.

Sera programmed the Ring as quickly as possible and hugged her wounded dog to her side. Then she slammed her hand down on the **ACTIVATE** button.

The last thing she heard was Dak yelling, "No! You'll ruin the moon!" And she saw him fall to his knees, shouting toward the heavens.

Then everything began spinning around her, and she was lost inside the warp.



## When It Rains, It Pours

SERA CRASH-LANDED out of her warp right onto the back of a grizzled Macedonian warrior wielding a shield and spear. He shouted something she couldn't understand while at the same time battling the two men in front of him. Sera wrapped her arms around his sweaty neck and hung on for dear life. The spear of one of the opposing men whizzed by Sera's right eye. An arrow stuck in the ground next to her warrior's feet.

The action was way too close for comfort, and she let out a scream in the man's ear.

Her dog howled in the distance.

"Daisy!" she shouted. "Ginger! I'm over here!"

War raged all around Sera. Tens of thousands of men engaged in battle on a cold, rainy day. Hundreds were already motionless on the ground, or in the small Pinarus River that ran right through the fight, clouds of red puffing out in the tide.

Sera had to get out of the fray or she'd be killed. But how? And why had she warped right into the red-hot center of the Battle of Issus? She remembered from reading about Riq — known as Hephaestion now — that Alexander the Great was leading his army against Darius and his Persian army, which was far superior in numbers. But reading about a

war was way different from finding herself in the heat of the battle, surrounded by death and rage and violence. Arrows screamed through the air. Spears clinked against shields. Horses galloped by, with armored warriors swinging lances. But what disturbed Sera most was the sound of grown men screaming.

She stopped looking around. It was too overwhelming. She had to concentrate on these three men, on getting safely to the ground and picking up the golden Ring, which lay on a patch of wet grass a few feet away. If she didn't grab it soon, it would be trampled and she'd be stuck here forever.

Just as she was preparing for her dismount, though, her warrior overtook one of his opponents, sinking his sword into the man's shoulder and quickly ripping it back out. The man collapsed to the ground, holding his wound and shouting curses in some foreign tongue. The man fighting at his side scurried off to a different part of the battle.

Before Sera knew what was happening, she'd been flipped over her warrior's back and slammed onto the ground, and the tip of a bloody sword was aimed at her heart.

The Macedonian shouted down at her, but she couldn't understand a word he was saying. "I'm sorry I landed on you!" she shouted back. "I'll go now!"

But she was wasting her breath.

They'd never be able to communicate.

The man lowered the sword so that the tip was pressing against the white Roman blouse she was wearing — which she knew made her stick out like a sore thumb.

"Hephaestion!" she shouted in desperation. "He's my friend!"

The man's face changed.

The pressure of the sword eased up a little, and Sera pulled in quick, anxious breaths.

"Hephaestion?" the warrior said.

“Yes!” Sera shouted. “Take me to him! He’ll explain everything, I promise.”

She knew the man couldn’t understand, but he seemed to get the gist of it because his eyes softened. They were friends with the same man. Hephaestion. Riq. A great man, whatever you chose to call him. Sera and Dak had read about all the amazing things he had done — and would do.

The Macedonian warrior took the sword away completely and held a hand out for Sera. Her breath caught as she reached up for it. Because she was safe for now. And she’d be taken to Riq. And the two of them could figure out what to do about Dak . . . *and* her parents.

Just as their hands met, however, a Persian soldier hurrying past them stabbed Sera’s warrior right in the back.

His hand went limp.

His eyes grew wide with fear as he continued staring at Sera. Then they drifted off to the side, and he collapsed right onto her, dead.

Sera climbed out from under him and checked his pulse and then screamed up at the heavens. Because what had just happened was all her fault.

Her dog howled again in the distance.

Sera pulled herself together, picked up the warrior’s sword and the muddy Infinity Ring, and moved through the battle, hardly thinking now. She just knew she had to find her dog and get off the battlefield somehow. Then she’d figure out what to do next.

She jabbed her sword in the direction of a few of the warriors she passed, men from both sides, but she didn’t try to hurt anyone. She just wanted to look the part. Mostly, though, people ignored her.

Sera found her dog pinned under a fallen horse. The dog whined pitifully, and Sera panicked for a moment, fearful that her companion was hurt. She was able to push the horse enough for her dog to wiggle out, though, and she was pretty sure that nothing was broken. The dog

danced on her paws and yipped, happy to see Sera but clearly anxious, too, as the battle raged all around them.

Sera led her down the slick bank, toward the river water, thinking they'd be able to walk along the stones sticking up out of the shallow water.

"How are we ever going to find Riq in this mess?" she asked her dog as they both struggled along the shore, slipping every few steps. It was impossible. She'd warped to the wrong date. But what was the *right* date? The history books all said the Battle of Issus ended sometime in November 333 BC. How was she to know what the actual day was if the history books couldn't be any more specific?

Warping without having a team of Hystorians behind her was an entirely different experience. Normally, she'd be able to track down an actual Hystorian or figure out a riddle on the SQuare or, at the very least, rely on Dak's knowledge.

Today, she was out here all alone.

About a hundred yards down the narrow, muddy trail, a wounded Persian warrior stepped out from the darkness ahead of her and shouted something she couldn't understand. He raised his sword in his left hand, challenging her, and Sera saw that his right arm hung limp and bloodied by his side.

"I don't want any trouble!" Sera shouted back. "I just want to pass!"

The wounded man began approaching her, waving his sword threateningly.

Sera backed up, pulling her dog back by the scruff of her neck. She would have made a run for it, but she was trapped between the water on one side of the narrow trail, and the steep bank on the other side, which was twice her height at this point.

Rain continued falling.

Sera shivered in the cold wind as she retreated, never taking her eyes off the man. A part of her wished she was still in Rome, with Dak. She

could have pretended everything was perfectly normal, bided her time until she figured out why Dak had been acting so strangely. If she could have just talked to him one-on-one, she was sure she could have brought him back to his true self.

But then she remembered how Dak had ordered the men in gold-trimmed cassocks to kick her dog. That was the one thing she didn't think she could ever forgive.

On cue, her dog barked, and Sera saw that the wounded warrior had broken into an awkward jog toward her. The man was injured to the point that Sera was pretty sure she could take him. He was staggering as he ran, one arm dangling useless. And he'd clearly lost a ton of blood. But she didn't want to take anyone right now. Not when she already felt responsible for what happened to the Macedonian warrior she'd fallen on.

Instead of confronting the Persian man, she turned and hurried back the way she'd come, her dog splashing in the water as she ran alongside her.

They climbed the bank at its shortest point and Sera saw that many of the Persian warriors were retreating, led by a man who had to be King Darius III. It was a strange sight, considering the Persians greatly outnumbered the Macedonians, but Alexander the Great had brilliantly used the lay of the land, broken up by the river, to his benefit.

The rain came harder as the fighting ceased, and Sera saw the true tragedy of war. There were fallen men everywhere. Many were motionless. Others lay wounded, shouting for help, the mud around them red with blood. Horses wandered aimlessly and a few men staggered past Sera, dragging their bloody swords behind them and staring vacantly ahead.

In the distance, Sera saw a group of men on horseback gathering up Persian soldiers who had surrendered or been left behind, wounded. And then they turned toward her.

Sera started backing away as the horses closed in on her. It was her clothes. They thought she was the enemy. She turned to run when they were less than twenty yards away, but there was nowhere to go. A few Macedonian warriors were on that side of her, too, arrows ready in their bows.

Then one of the men on horseback shouted something in a powerful voice, and everyone stopped.

Sera spun around to look at that man, and her heart started pounding inside her chest.

It was Riq. Or Hephaestion.

She was saved.

He barked another order at his men, and two of them, both on horseback, trotted toward her. The first one picked her up by the back of her shirt and threw her over the front of his horse. Another man captured her dog in a large net and began dragging her away.

“No!” Sera shouted. “That’s my dog!”

But the men didn’t even slow down.

Sera turned to Riq, horrified, and shouted, “What’s happening? What did you tell them to do?”

Riq removed his helmet and looked Sera over for a few long seconds. He was a little bit older than when she’d last seen him, taller and broader with a new fierceness in his brown eyes. “I told them to throw you in jail,” he said in a cold voice she hardly recognized. “Because that’s where you belong.”

“What?” Sera said, a wave of panic spreading through her entire body. “Riq, it’s me. Sera.”

Riq didn’t even bother answering this time. He tapped his horse with his foot and started galloping away.

Sera was in shock as one of the men on foot came up to her and wrestled away the golden Infinity Ring.

“No!” she cried. “Tell Riq — I mean, Hephaestion — I need that!”

But she knew her words were meaningless. They didn't understand her, and even if they did, Riq was the one who'd ordered her to be thrown in jail. As the horse she was on began trotting toward the end of the field, Sera wracked her brain to try and figure out what had just happened. The only thing she could think of was that Riq had been brainwashed somehow. Turned against her. Just like Dak.

And there was only one party who could be responsible.

Her parents.





# PART FOUR



## Who Will Do the Honors?

WHEN SERA heard the guards coming, she stood up and went to the uneven metal bars, and listened to the sound of their footsteps coming down the hall, like she always did. She'd been in the Macedonian jail for five days now, and they still hadn't told her what crime she'd committed — not that she would have understood the guards' explanation anyway. Without a translator device, it all just sounded like ancient gibberish.

What bothered her most, though, was the fact that Riq still hadn't come to visit her. She was beginning to think there was no one left she could trust.

Not Riq.

Not Dak.

Not her parents.

She'd never felt so alone in her life.

“Take me to Hephaestion!” she shouted when the footfalls grew closer. She heard the usual two sets of feet, but this time she also heard a strange dragging sound. One of her prison mates, an old man with long gray hair and a gray beard, shouted something back at Sera. He'd been shouting at her since she'd arrived, and since she couldn't understand

him, she no longer even acknowledged him. There were five other prisoners in the cell with her. Two Persian war prisoners, two Macedonian street thieves, and the old man. She kept as far away from them as possible during the day and slept sitting against the wall with one eye open.

Sera backed away from the metal bars as the guards finally came into view. They weren't bringing dinner like she had expected, though. They were dragging another prisoner toward the cell.

His head was bowed, and he was wearing a strange Asian robe that didn't at all match the time period. And then Sera glanced down at this new prisoner's shoes.

A pair of checkered Vans.

Her breath caught.

She watched the guards unlock the heavy door and swing it open and dump the limp body onto the brick floor. They promptly locked the cell door behind them and disappeared down the long hall.

Sera stared down at the small body lying by her feet. His oversized robe had flown up over his head, so she couldn't see his face, but he had on a modern pair of jeans and a T-shirt. And those Vans. Not exactly what you'd expect in ancient Anatolia. But how could this be? She'd left Dak back in seventeenth-century Rome without a time-travel device.

She slowly kicked the robe off the boy's face and her entire body went cold.

It was Dak, all right.

The old man was on his knees now, shouting up at the roof of the cell and pointing at Sera and Dak.

She kicked the robe back over her ex-best friend's face and moved as far away from him as possible, sitting against the opposite wall to try and think. How had he gotten here? And why was he wearing an ancient Chinese robe? And what was wrong with him? And why wouldn't this old man give it a rest?

Sera sat there for over an hour, waiting for Dak to wake up.

The guards brought dinner, a watery stew with some unidentifiable meat Sera refused to eat.

After they removed the food, the daylight that had been flooding through the small cell window began fading away.

The rest of the prisoners soon fell asleep, even the old man, but not Sera. She stared at Dak's motionless body, vowing to keep *both* eyes open tonight. There was no way she was going to let her guard down now.



Sera woke with a start and found Dak standing over her. She scrambled to her feet and got into a fighting position, fists clenched, ready to defend herself. How could this have happened? She'd only closed her eyes for a couple of seconds. But the entire cell was lit up by sunlight again. It had to have been longer.

*Stupid!* she thought.

"So, how'd you manage it?" Dak asked, getting into a fighting position of his own.

"Manage *what*?" Sera said, spitting out the words. Her brain was still slow from sleep, but she knew she had to focus, and fast.

"Getting me thrown into jail."

"Are you kidding?" Sera shouted. "The question is how'd you find me?"

They began slowly circling each other in the cell, staring at each other, waving around their fists. Sera watched Dak's mouth move as he talked, but she also watched his hips in order to pick up on any sudden movements so she'd be able to react in time.

"How'd I *find* you?" Dak countered. "I've been trying to get *away* from you!"

Sera picked up a broken piece of brick for protection. If it came down to it, she'd fire it right between Dak's eyes. Even if she missed her bull's-eye, his head was so big, she was bound to do some kind of damage.

Dak picked up a jagged board.

As they continued circling in the cell, never taking their eyes off each other, Sera stepped over the legs of the other prisoners, most of whom had begun to hoot and holler, excited to have some form of entertainment. Only the weird old man seemed to be pleading for peace.

"I'll never understand it!" Sera shouted at Dak. "How anyone could do that to their own best friend!"

"Me?" Dak scoffed. "I tried to give you the benefit of the doubt as long as I could, Sera. And then you tried to stab me —"

"I see you've been busy since I last saw you," she said, pointing at Dak's Chinese robe. "What animals did you harm over there?"

Dak spit, wielding his board like a sword. "Are you seriously gonna pretend you didn't stab me with that needle?" He pointed at his forearm, shouting, "Look at my arm, Sera! I'm bleeding like a stuck pig!"

Sera saw the small trickle of dried blood on his forearm. He'd always been a baby about cuts and bruises, but was he really blaming *her*? "I'll never forgive you for kicking my dog," she told him. "Why don't you come on over here, Dak? I'll show you what it feels like to get kicked in the ribs."

"Your *dog*?" Dak scoffed. "Is that what we're now calling that flying can opener?"

"You're not even making any sense!" Sera shouted.

"You've gone insane!" Dak fired back.

Sera's cell mates were all on their feet now, urging her and Dak to fight. They wanted blood. Anything to break up the monotony of sitting in jail all day doing nothing. And maybe they were right. Maybe Sera should just punch Dak in the nose and settle it that way. She was so tired

and hungry and frustrated, she could barely form a coherent thought. And her words were coming out all jumbled. And didn't everyone always say that actions speak louder than words?

"I can look the other way about a lot of things," Dak growled between clenched teeth. "But you did the unforgivable, Sera. You ruined my taste for smoked Gouda. I can't even *picture* it now without feeling sick to my stomach."

"You used me to win a trial!" Sera countered. "And what thanks do I get? You chase me down like a wild animal."

Dak turned to the other prisoners. "Has she tried to stab any of you in the neck yet?" he shouted. "Because that's her new pastime! She especially likes stabbing old people!" He pointed at the man with the beard, who appeared to have tears on his cheeks.

Sera was so angry, she actually screamed.

A couple of the other prisoners laughed at her, which made Sera even *angrier*. She fired the brick at Dak's feet but missed. And then Dak charged at her and slammed his piece of wood against the wall right above her head. The wood fell from his hands and they grabbed on to each other's arms and tumbled onto the floor, Sera pulling Dak's hair and Dak pinching the skin on the back of her arm and twisting.

Dak leapt off her, shouting, "I knew it! You've been trying to kill me from the second we warped out of the forest!"

"*Me?*" Sera shouted back, climbing to her feet and rubbing her arm. "You've been trying to poison me with your stupid tamales since you showed up at my house. Oh, wait, I forgot. Your *Mayan* tamales. That was a nice touch, Dak! Using my ancestry against me!"

Dak spit again and shouted, "You're a liar, Sera Froste!"

"No, *you're* a liar, Dak Smyth!"

One of the other prisoners shouted something over their argument, and Sera looked at him. She turned back to Dak, saying, "Aren't you gonna tell me what he said? Or was that your plan all along? To have one

of your thugs rip the translation device right out of my ear and leave me helpless?”

“*You’re* the one with the stupid translation device!” Dak shouted back. “You tell *me* what he said!”

“Why don’t I do the honors?” Sera heard a deep, manly voice say. She looked toward the prison door and saw someone standing there, someone tall enough that she could only see his chest through the metal bars.

But it was his perfect English that gave him away.

“I believe the literal translation would be, ‘Shut up, you idiots. The guards are here.’ And he was right on all counts. The guards are indeed here with me, and sadly you’re both idiots.” The owner of the voice then lowered himself enough for Sera to make out his face.

“Riq!” Dak shouted. “My man! It’s been way too long. Get me out of here ASAP so we can discuss our next course of action.”

Sera watched a big smile come over Riq’s face. “Let you out?” he said. “Now, why would I want to do that? I’m the one who had you both thrown in here in the first place.” He turned to the two guards he was with and said something in Greek. From the tone, Sera guessed it wasn’t a request for extra pillows.

And with that, Riq began walking away from their cell.

Sera looked over at Dak, who was frowning so hard, his forehead was folding in on itself. He was just as angry and confused as she was. But there was something familiar in his eyes, too. Something she hadn’t seen in days.

Whatever it was made her unclench her fists.

Still, it wasn’t like she was going to *talk* to him after everything that had happened in Rome. She went clear to the other side of the cell and slid down the wall into a sitting position and watched him.

The old man was on his knees again, staring at the ceiling and preaching.

This time, Sera vowed not to let her eyes rest for even a second.





## Double Duty

THE NEXT morning, Riq paced back and forth in his chambers, stressed out and exhausted. There were several people outside who needed to meet with him, but if he didn't take a second for himself, he was going to lose it.

They had been victorious in the Battle of Issus, yes, but he was starting to think victory brought as many headaches as defeat. Before Alexander the Great had headed down the Phoenician coast, he'd left Riq — better known around these parts as Hephaestion — in charge of appointing someone to the throne of Sidon, and it was a task Riq didn't take lightly. On top of that, he was in charge of realigning the Persian border and figuring out what to do with the ninety-seven remaining Persian war prisoners. He knew he was going to release them, but he hadn't figured out how to do it safely. He also had his own wounded warriors to look after. And on top of all that, Dak and Sera had decided that now was a good time to crash-land back into his life.

He used to think stress levels were high in the twenty-first century, especially when he had a big soccer match, or a test at school, but that was before he became the right-hand man of Alexander the Great.

The job accounted for his stress. The exhaustion came from his secret — and it was a big one.

For the past six weeks, Riq had been pulling double duty. He was, by day, Hephaestion, Alexander's best friend and top adviser, and by night, he was a time-traveling Hystorian who was slowly but surely uncovering some incredibly odd developments he had started to believe were the work of Tilda and what was left of the SQ.

In other words, Riq hardly ever slept.

He couldn't have known it at the time, but he was forever changed on the day he and Dak and Sera had finally defeated Tilda. In his anger with her, he'd shattered the woman's Eternity Ring — and tachyon fluid had splattered all over his bare hands and arms. Initially he was worried the fluid might be toxic, but Riq wasn't poisoned. It turned out the fluid had other effects entirely.

He figured it out one day by accident. He was taking a late-night stroll outside the castle he now lived in, when he started thinking about the Mayan girl from Izamal who had meant so much to him. Kisa. He remembered the date they'd last seen each other and he repeated it to himself in every language he knew that night. He was only trying to keep his language skills sharp. But when he mumbled the date in binary code, everything started swirling around him, and he blacked out. When he came to, he was in Izamal, 628 AD. And there was Kisa, sitting outside her hut all alone, eating something out of a clay bowl.

His stomach flooded with butterflies.

But he knew he couldn't speak to her. That might throw something off in the time continuum, and the last thing he wanted was to undo all the hard work he, Dak, and Sera had put into fixing the Breaks. He was nowhere near smart enough to figure out how it all worked, but he was smart enough to know not to tempt fate. So he settled for watching her over the course of the next few hours. He felt a little bit like a creep, but

it was worth it. Because she was just as graceful and beautiful as he remembered.

And happy. It was good to see that she was happy.

He warped back to Anatolia that night before the sun came up over his new home city. It was easy, once he understood it. In essence, his entire body was an Infinity Ring now. He just had to program himself by speaking in code.

The following night, after he was done with all his duties, he opted for a different kind of warp. He went back to Athens to check up on Tilda, who had been left there, soundly defeated. Only Tilda was nowhere to be found. Instead, he heard rumors of a ghostly red-haired woman with a magical golden relic. People said they'd seen her vanish into thin air. And that's how his current wild-goose chase through time had begun.

He suspected that Tilda had somehow gained access to another time-travel device and had come up with a new plan, one that he was afraid might be more ambitious and sinister than anything before. He'd been racing through time — during his off hours — ever since, trying to uncover exactly what she was up to. But if Tilda was out there, she was keeping a low profile. Probably getting others to do her dirty work — like these AB Pacifists who seemed to be popping up everywhere.

There was another knock, and Riq started across the room toward the door. It looked like his quiet time was coming to an end.

He paused in front of the door, remembering the most troubling thing he'd learned during his six weeks of recon warps. Both Dak and Sera were actually *assisting* the AB Pacifists. But just last night, Riq had discovered what was really happening.

They had been tricked.

The knocking became more desperate, and Riq finally pulled open the door. It was two of his guards with a man he instantly recognized as Abdalonymus, the simple, trustworthy farmer he intended to crown king

of Sidon — his last order of business before taking Dak and Sera on a little trip.

“Hello, there,” he said, bowing in front of the man. “Please, have a seat inside and I’ll be with you in a moment.”

The man gave a bow in return and went inside.

Riq stepped outside with his guards. “The two kids,” he said, “have they killed each other yet?”

“Not yet,” the larger guard said. “They’re still staying as far away from each other as possible.”

Riq grinned, picturing the two of them eying each other distrustfully all day. Wait until he told them the truth about how Tilda had been fooling them.

“They didn’t get dinner, as you ordered. Should we feed them breakfast?” the smaller guard asked.

Riq rubbed his shoulder, where a small scar had begun to itch. He didn’t remember where the scar had come from. He must have been cut in some battle.

He thought of his old friends, hungry in a cell.

What happened wasn’t technically Dak’s or Sera’s fault. But they could have been quicker to figure things out — especially Dak. “I’ll bring them food myself,” he told the guards. “Get a basket together.” Riq grinned to himself. “But no cheese.”

The guards nodded and went off to perform their daily duties. Riq stepped back inside his office, readying himself to crown a new king.



## A Different Kind of Warp

IT WAS early morning when Dak heard the guards shuffling down the hall, toward his cell. He stood up, eyeing Sera and the other prisoners. They were all still asleep. Dak rubbed his eyes, wondering how long he himself had been asleep. He'd vowed to stay awake through the night, but his exhaustion had gotten the best of him.

The door opened and in walked Riq, wearing a leather satchel and holding a large basket full of food. Dak's stomach immediately started growling. The thought of food was almost enough to make him forget how angry he was at Riq.

And Sera.

And just about everyone else he could think of.

Riq dismissed the guards and then turned to Dak and gave him a nod.

Dak was stiff from sleep, but that didn't stop him from staggering over to Riq. "I want answers," he demanded, getting in the bigger kid's face, "and I want them right this second."

"I'm sure you do," Riq said, leaning away from Dak. "I'd bet you want a toothbrush, too."

"And something to eat," Dak added. "Anything but smoked Gouda."

"Or tamales," Sera chimed in.

Dak turned around and saw that Sera was on her feet now, too. They watched each other uncertainly.

Riq set the basket on the ground. “There’s fruit and bread and stuff in there. But I have to say, you guys aren’t exactly in the best position to be making demands.”

Dak dove into the basket first, grabbing a hunk of bread and a big stem of grapes. Sera reached in after him, followed by a couple of the other prisoners who had woken up, too. “What do you mean we shouldn’t make demands?” Dak said between bites of the stale bread. “I didn’t do *anything*.”

“Please,” Sera said, rolling her eyes. “*I’m* the one who’s innocent.”

They shot each other dirty looks.

All but one of the other prisoners were at the basket now. They were reaching in and pulling out the rest of the bread and fruits and olives and figs.

The loud old man with the wild gray hair and beard was back to his preaching again. He was on his knees, pointing at the stone ceiling of the cell and crying.

“What’s he going on about anyway?” Dak asked.

Riq shook his head. “Some nonsense about the moon exploding. He was passed out in a ravine when my men picked him up.” He motioned between Dak and Sera. “So, I take it there’s not a whole lot of trust between you two right now.”

“Me, trust *him*?” Sera said, pointing at Dak. “Not a chance.”

Dak scoffed. “The feeling’s quite mutual, my dear.”

Riq was still grinning in this irritating way as he watched Dak and Sera wolf down their food. “How should I put this?” he said.

“What are you beating around the bush about?” Dak said, firing a grape at the older boy’s legs. “Just say what you have to say. We deserve to know why you had us thrown in here in the first place.”

“Exactly,” Sera said. “We deserve the truth.”

Dak and Sera looked at each other. It felt odd to be on the same side again — about *anything*. Dak looked away so she wouldn't start thinking they were friends again.

“The truth can be a dangerous thing sometimes,” Riq said. “I'm not sure you're prepared for what I have to say.”

Dak and Sera both stopped eating and shot him nasty scowls. Sera gave a little growl that actually kind of impressed Dak, so he growled, too.

“Okay,” Riq said. “Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Remember our little friends from the SQ? The group we supposedly eliminated?”

Dak furrowed his brow at Riq. “What do you think, dude?” he said sarcastically. “We only risked our lives to stop them.”

“Well, another group has risen up from their ashes,” Riq said. “They call themselves the AB Pacifists. And I'm almost certain they're led by Tilda herself.”

Dak almost choked on his food. He looked at Sera, remembering the men she'd been associating with in ancient China, and then Massachusetts. “By any chance, do these guys wear a lot of gold?” he asked Riq.

“As a matter of fact, they do.”

Sera pointed at Dak. “You —!”

“Me?” Dak said, cutting her off. “More like *you!*”

“Hang on,” Riq said. “It gets worse. The AB punked you *both*. They've been spying on you and your families from the minute you made it back to the present. From what I've gathered, they may have approached you separately with clone versions of each other. In other words, Dak, you were approached by a fake Sera. And, Sera, you were approached by a fake Dak.”

Dak's eyes grew wide. “Clones?!”

He'd known there was something off about the Sera he'd just been warping around with, but he figured her parents had gotten to her somehow. He'd never even considered that he might be with Sera's evil clone.

"How?" Sera said. "There are only a few experts in the world who understand how cloning works. And they're nowhere near that level of sophistication." She sounded more impressed than horrified.

Riq shrugged. "I'm not exactly sure about that part yet. Or what Tilda's plan is. I just know it's up to us to stop her."

"Us?" Dak asked uncertainly. He looked at Sera and then looked at Riq again. A few hours ago, he'd decided there was no more "us." It surprised him how badly he wanted to believe Riq's outrageous explanation.

Dak watched Riq glance at the other prisoners, who had made off with the basket he'd brought in. The only one who wasn't huddled around it, wolfing down food, was the old man. Dak was still starving, but he wasn't exactly in the mood to argue over a few olives right now. He had a feeling Riq was about to drop another bomb on him and Sera.

"Yes, the three of us fixed all the original Breaks," Riq started. "And in doing so, we saved the planet from the Cataclysm. But Tilda's up to something else now. She's gone missing just as a new group of thugs has begun twisting events throughout time. I don't know what she's setting up exactly, but I do know she's been using *you* to help her cause. And from what I've gathered, she's just a few moves away from enacting the final stages of her plan."

"How do you know all this?" Dak asked.

"Never mind," Riq said. "There'll be time to discuss that later."

"I don't understand why they'd need us for any of this," Sera said. "Wouldn't Tilda want to keep as far away from us as possible?"

"I don't fully understand it," Riq said. "But for some reason, all the traditional time-traveling devices have stopped working for the clones."



Don't ask me why. The Ring was always keyed to your DNA, but clones should have the same DNA as you. Exactly the same. Anyway, in order for the AB to make their final few stops, they needed to trick you two into helping them. Which . . . didn't prove to be the most difficult task."

Dak walked toward the cell door, which was closed again, and locked. This was all too much to handle. How did Riq know all this? And was there really a Dak clone out there somewhere? And what were they supposed to do to stop Tilda when they no longer had a Square or Hystorians to help them? He spun around to Riq and said, "I've heard some crazy things in my life, but this . . . I mean, the idea of time travel alone is nuts if you actually stop and think about it."

"Not really," Sera said. "It's all just science. It only seems impossible until someone figures it out."

Dak threw his hand up in the air. "The point is, I'm having a real hard time wrapping my head around the idea of me and Sera having a clone."

Riq started laughing quietly.

"What now?" Dak said.

"Oh, you have more than just one clone," Riq said.

Sera wiped her hands down her face and said, "Why do I have the feeling I'm not gonna like what you're about to say?"

"Because you're not," Riq said. "There's an entire clone factory of you guys on a small private island off the coast of twentieth-century Greece."

Dak almost choked on his last grape. He coughed and spit it out and stared at Riq. "Wait, *what?*"

"I'll prove it," Riq said.

Sera smacked her own forehead and said, "Let's take a step back here for a second. We destroyed Tilda's Eternity Ring. How is she leading *anything?*"

“I honestly don’t know,” Riq said. “But let me ask you guys something. Did you happen to notice anything a little out of the ordinary in the present? Before you went on your separate warps?”

Dak’s eyes grew wide. “Dude, I saw a pterosaur in the forest,” he said. “Or at least I thought I did. But then I just figured it was my mind playing tricks on me.”

Riq grinned. “No, that was probably real.”

“I saw this strange disk hovering in the air near the barn,” Sera said. “Like it was — wait a second, are you telling me that was Tilda’s people spying on me?”

“The fake you had one of those, too,” Dak blurted out. “She called it her pet, ABe.”

Riq took the leather satchel off his shoulder. He pulled it open and passed Dak and Sera each a gold Infinity Ring as well as a new translation device. “Here are your Rings back. Put the earpieces in now. You’re gonna need to hear and see this for yourselves. Then we’ll come up with a plan.”

Dak followed Riq and Sera out of the prison cell, feeling his pulse quicken. In China, and then Massachusetts, he had felt so worthless. He was just standing on the sidelines while Sera — or who he *thought* was Sera — did all the work. But now he felt like he was needed again. And even though he didn’t exactly understand what they were trying to stop, he knew it was something big, something important, and it made him feel like he mattered again.

He stood aside as Riq locked the door behind them, the other prisoners protesting in their ancient language. After a few seconds, his translation device kicked into gear, and he could actually understand what they were saying. Most of them were demanding that Riq let them out. But the old man was saying something completely different. “You have to listen to what I’m saying!” he pleaded. “The heavens! She claims she’s going to take over the heavens!”

As Dak followed Sera and Riq down the long hall, he tried to wrap his head around the old man's message and everything else he'd just heard. The heavens. Clones. The AB Pacifists. New Infinity Ring technology. And then he recalled something that seemed like it could be related. Sera's dad had made them play that strange spitting game in the middle of dinner. What if he'd taken their spit back to Tilda? And what if that spit somehow factored into the production of these clones?

Dak watched Sera as they continued walking. He was no longer mad at her. In fact, he now felt sorry for her. Because it was possible that her parents were at the front lines of Tilda's new regime.

All the poor girl wanted was her family back. And look where that got her.

It didn't seem fair.

The three of them popped out into a courtyard, and Riq looked all around, making sure they were alone.

"What exactly do you know about these AB Pacifists?" Sera asked. "Are my parents . . . ?"

Dak was surprised that Sera had been thinking about the exact same thing.

"I'll explain everything I know," Riq said, "once we get to Santorini."

Dak frowned. "Santorini?"

"The Greek island we're about to visit." Riq scanned their surroundings again.

Dak and Sera both pulled out their gold Infinity Rings, but Riq waved them off, saying, "I got this one, guys."

"Since when do *you* have a Ring?" Dak asked.

"Technically, I don't," Riq said. "Now, grab on to my arms and hold on tight."

"Wait," Sera said. "What about my dog?"

“Don’t worry,” Riq said. “I gave her the run of my entire sleeping quarters. One of my guards is looking after her. Now, grab on.”

Dak felt a little strange reaching out for Riq’s arm, but he did it anyway. His chest flooded with excitement. He looked to Sera and nodded. And it made him happier than he expected when she nodded in return.

He had his best friend back.

Riq closed his eyes and tilted his head up toward the sky, and all of a sudden his entire body started shaking and his eyes vibrated behind his eyelids, like he was having some kind of seizure. Before Dak could even react, though, everything began spinning around them and he felt a familiar weightlessness come over his entire body. As they slipped into the darkness of their strange warp, Dak tried to imagine what he might find on the other side, but his thoughts were soon lost as he was sucked up into the void.



## Before the War

SERA HAD never warped so many times in such a short amount of time, and it was starting to wreak havoc on her body. She had a dull headache now that followed her everywhere. And the tips of all her fingers and toes tingled. And this time, when she came to, in the middle of what looked like some kind of high school campus, there was a loud ringing in her ears.

She stood up and looked at Dak and Riq, who were both staring back at her, holding fingers in their ears.

So it wasn't just her.

The ringing sound stopped just as suddenly as it had begun.

"I take it that was some sort of school bell," Dak said.

Riq rubbed his temples, saying, "Of course it was a school bell. I warped us back to the AB Academy in 1955, on the island of —"

Before he could finish, the doors of the large building behind them swung open and a stream of students began rushing out, funneling around Sera, Dak, and Riq.

Sera's eyes grew wide as she focused in on their faces. "What the heck?" she managed to mumble under her breath.

Half of them looked exactly like her.

The other half, like Dak.

And all of them were wearing shiny gold bracelets.

As Sera stared at the endless stream of faces, her stomach felt like it was floating up into her throat, like it did when she went on roller coasters.

“Told you,” Riq said.

The students were all hurrying past them, toward what looked to be some sort of cafeteria across the perfectly manicured lawn. They barely paid any attention to Sera, Dak, and Riq because they fit right in. At least Sera and Dak did. And Riq was with them. It was the first warp Sera had ever been on in which she wasn't the least bit worried about blending in.

She *was* these people.

She turned to Dak, whose mouth was hanging open like an old sock. It was the first time in ages she'd seen him speechless.

“They're all over the island,” Riq said, waving his hand around.

“There are literally hundreds of them. Thousands, maybe.”

It was weird enough for Sera to be looking at clones of herself at her current age, but there were Seras of different ages, too. Kindergarten versions and third-grade versions and even high school versions. What freaked her out most of all were the adult versions who walked by, more leisurely. One of them, who looked like she was about fifty, even smiled at Sera and gave a little wink. It was like looking in a twisted fun-house mirror.

“Uh, you were right, Riq,” Sera said. “I'm not sure I was ready for this.”

Dak spun all the way around, looking at all of the students. “Well, at least now I know I age well,” he said.

“Are you kidding me, Dak?” Sera barked. “We're standing here in a never-ending stream of our own clones and *that's* what you're focused on?”

“What?” Dak whined. “Look at this twenty-something me right here.” He pointed toward an older Dak clone walking past them, arm in arm with an older version of Sera, eating string cheese. “Let’s be honest. I turn out to be a handsome, handsome man. Check out that physique, Sera. I’m ripped.”

All Sera could do was shake her head. “Please understand, Dak. The only reason the older me is walking so close to the older you is because there’s not a whole lot else to choose from.”

“Whatever you say,” Dak told her. “Come here, let’s hook our arms together and see if it’s a good fit.”

“Gross,” Sera said. “I’d rather make out with my dog.”

“Let’s focus,” Riq said. “Do you guys have any idea what all these clones are doing here?”

“Making the population a little smarter?” Dak said. “And easier on the eyes?”

Riq shot Dak a dirty look. “The AB Pacifists are sending the clones all over history to carry out their plan. At least they were, before their bootleg time-travel devices stopped working.”

“What’s the plan, though?” Sera asked.

“That’s what we’re here to find out.” Riq gazed up the small staircase, toward the open doors. “Follow me,” he said. “We need to see what’s happening here.”



Sera and Dak trailed Riq through the quiet halls of the school, peeking into empty classrooms as they walked.

“You’ve been here before?” Dak asked.

“Just last night,” Riq said in a low voice. “I found a phony Dak wandering around seventeenth-century Rome, furious at being stranded.” He gave Sera a rare smile. “Nice job ditching him, by the way. Anyway,

he pretended to be the genuine article and asked me to bring him to this island on this date. I left him behind but decided to check out where his directions led. That's when I realized you two had been duped."

"In more ways than one," Dak said.

Riq gave him a blank look.

"I mean *duped* like *tricked* and *duped* like *duplicated*," Dak explained.

"Yeah," Riq said. "I got it. Language guy, remember?"

Sera grinned. She'd really missed how Riq handled Dak. "What else did you learn?" she asked.

"Not much," Riq said. "I got close enough to hear about the bogus Rings not working without you two, and that you'd both given them the slip. Then I got spotted and had to book it. In case you didn't notice, I don't really blend in here. I'm hoping having you with me will buy me some time. If anyone asks, I'll say I'm your uncle."

Dak shook his head. "Not sure that's gonna fly."

"So you don't know what they're being taught here?" Sera asked. "Are they learning how to be . . . us?"

"Dude, you can't *learn* to be me," Dak said. "You have to be born this way."

"They were born that way," Riq said. "They're identical to you in terms of IQ, height, weight, vision, hearing. . . ."

"But they're total jerks!" Dak countered.

Riq shrugged. "Maybe the SQ isn't training them to think like you. Maybe they're training the *yous* to think like *them*."

Right after Riq said this, a whistle wailed through the long hall. Sera spun around and saw a large older man in a gold-trimmed security uniform march toward them, spastically blowing his whistle.

"Come on!" Riq shouted, pulling Sera and Dak the other way. The three of them took off running. They rounded the near corner and sprinted a long stretch of hall and then ducked around a second corner.



“In here,” Dak hissed, pointing toward a classroom door that was slightly ajar.

Sera followed the two boys into the classroom, where they found two Daks, approximately the same age as Dak was now, hovering over a model of Dak’s actual house and barn back home.

The real Dak’s eyes grew wide as he stared at the barn and then looked up at his clones. “Uh . . . hey,” he said.

One of them stepped away from the model and gave Dak and Sera a head nod. “Mason hassling you guys about getting to class?”

“Yeah,” Sera said, hoping she wouldn’t give them away. “He’s always . . . hassling people, isn’t he?”

“Tell me about it,” the other clone said, shaking his head. “We’re stuck in this place, like, eight hours a day. Why can’t we take a little time for ourselves here and there?”

Mason’s whistle sounded closer.

“Cube of cheddar?” the other clone said, pulling a napkin out of his pocket.

The real Dak glanced at Sera and Riq before reaching his hand out. “Don’t mind if I do, my good man.” He popped a couple of cubes in his mouth and grinned while he chewed. “You guys are all right,” he said with his mouth half full.

“So, what’s up with this guy?” the first clone said, pointing at Riq. “He cool?”

“He’s cool,” Sera said.

“I’m cool,” Riq agreed.

Mason was right outside the door now, shouting into his walkie-talkie, “I’ve got a possible code silver here. I repeat: code silver. Two sixth-grade versions on the run. No visible wristbands. Accompanied by an older boy who’s not a student. Last seen heading west down Smyth Hall. Requesting backup.”

The first clone opened a closet and said, “Get in! You don’t want him to send you home.”

Sera, Dak, and Riq squeezed into the closet, and the clone slid it closed. Sera stood beside Riq, trying not to make a sound, and listening. She heard the door open and Mason ask the clones if they’d seen anything out of the ordinary. They assured the man they hadn’t, and Sera heard Mason leave and start blowing his whistle in the hall again.

“Thanks,” Riq said to the clones as he stepped out of the closet. “Well, we should be going. I’ve gotta go tutor these two.” He pulled Dak and Sera with him toward the door.

“Dude,” one of the clones said to the other. “Doesn’t he look like that language guy they taught us about last semester?”

“Oh yeah,” the other one said. “The dope who used his genius to advance the Hystorian agenda and mess up this timeline.”

“Dude,” the real Dak said, “this is totally a clone of that dope.”

Sera elbowed Dak in the ribs.

The two clones looked at each other. “A clone? Cool,” one of them said.

“Yeah, sweet,” the other one added. “Mad science.”

Riq opened the door, and Sera and Dak followed him back out into the hall, where they looked both ways, but Mason was nowhere to be found. “Dude, this is getting a little creepy,” Dak said.

“A *little*?” Sera said.

Dak shook his head. “Maybe wasting the day away in a hammock isn’t such a bad idea after all. They should teach *that* here.”

“Let’s keep moving,” Riq barked, and the three of them hurried back the other way.

“You’re not a dope, by the way,” Sera said as they continually passed empty classrooms.

“I’ve been called worse,” Riq said. “I assumed part of the instruction here would be anti-Hystorian, and that confirmed it. They’re being

brainwashed.”

In a few minutes, they came across a large lecture hall. They peeked through the window and saw that every seat was filled with Seras and Daks who looked to be a year or two older than Sera and Dak were now. Sera stared at another Sera through the window. She was taking notes in a notebook that looked exactly like the kind she used back in school.

“Come on,” Riq said to Sera in a soft voice. He pointed down the hall, toward the back door of the lecture hall. They hurried over to it and Riq pulled it open slowly and quietly.

One Dak and two Seras turned to look at them, but their presence wasn’t causing that much of a stir. They huddled in the door and listened to the teacher.

“. . . and tomorrow we’ll look at the challenge of zero gravity,” he was saying. “Tonight, I want you to read the first three chapters in your physics textbook.”

Sera heard some of the people in the class moan. She realized it was just the Daks.

“Hey,” the teacher said. “Nobody said this was going to be easy. Those self-righteous Hystorians messed up our timeline. We lost the Earth in a war with them. But we’ve set our sights on a much grander utopia now. And thanks to your brothers and sisters, we’re close. We’re so close, I can feel myself floating across the lunar surface.”

Sera looked around the class as a buzz spread through all the students. Were they really setting their sights on space?

“That old man back in the cell we were in,” Dak whispered, elbowing Sera, “didn’t he say something about some lady taking over the ‘heavens’?”

“Oh, man,” Riq whispered. “He did.”

“Is it possible he knows something?” Sera asked.

“I don’t know how,” Riq whispered. “But we should at least go back and talk to him. It sounds like these clones are getting close to something

big.”

Sera ushered them back out into the hallway. “They’re not clones,” she said.

Dak gave her a dirty look. “What else would they be?”

“Time is a river,” Sera said. “Remember? And the Infinity Ring let us move up and down the river whenever we wanted.”

“Go on,” Riq said.

“But sometimes rivers branch off. A single river splits into two or three.”

“What are you talking about?” Dak asked.

“I’m talking about alternate timelines. Parallel dimensions.” Sera was so excited by the theoretical science, she almost tripped over her own words. “Weren’t you listening? Those duplicates of yours mentioned *this* timeline. They didn’t want to be sent home. They were surprised when you mentioned cloning.”

“But how . . . ?” Riq began.

“I think Tilda’s device isn’t just a time-travel device,” Sera said. “I think it’s a dimensional-travel device. She needed a time-traveling army with our DNA, so she recruited versions of us from alternate realities. She fed them lies about what the Hystorians had done here. Told them they could save the world if they worked for her!”

Someone suddenly snatched Sera’s arm from behind, barking, “Where are your ID bracelets?”

Sera spun around and found herself eye to eye with Mason, the security guard who’d been chasing them.

“Her dog ate them,” Dak said.

“There are no dogs on the entire island,” Mason shouted.

Dak cleared his throat. “I mean . . . her pet guinea pig?”

“Enough nonsense,” Mason said. “I don’t care what Tilda saw in you. We’re sending you back to your own timeline. Plenty more where you came from.”

“Now!” Riq shouted.

Sera ripped her arm out of Mason’s grip and took off after Riq and Dak, back down the long hall.

“Get back here!” Mason shouted, racing after them.

They took a sharp turn and ran right out the front doors of the school and down the small staircase, onto the lawn.

Sera watched Dak accidentally slam right into another Dak who was coming back from lunch.

“Dude,” the duplicate said, looking down at the sack lunch he’d dropped.

“Dude yourself,” the real Dak answered.

And then something unexpected happened. The duplicate vanished into thin air.

“Whoa,” Dak said.

“Let’s get out of here,” Riq said. “Come on, Dak.”

Dak nodded and took Riq’s arm.

Sera was still staring at the school, though. High above the doors, there was a line written in Latin that made her heart skip a beat: IN STATU QUO RES ERANT ANTE BELLEM.

“Riq,” she said, pointing to it, “what does that say in English?”

Mason and two other guards were descending the steps now and closing fast.

“The state in which things were before the war,” Riq told her. “Now grab on. We’ve got an old man to go speak to.”

Sera grabbed on to Riq’s other arm, and Riq tilted his head toward the bright blue sky and closed his eyes and started shaking.

The three guards were all blowing their whistles and waving for them to stop.

But Sera was stuck on that saying on the wall: *In statu quo res erant ante bellum*. The initials of two words made up SQ. And the initials of

the last two words made up *AB*. Her stomach dropped out. She'd never really stopped to think about what either set of initials stood for. But there it was, clear as day.

*In statu quo res erant ante bellum.*

Or as Riq had just translated it: "The state in which things were before the war." Tilda's people weren't ready to admit defeat.

Sera didn't have time to break it down any further, though, because everything around her was now spinning furiously. And in a few seconds, she was enveloped in the darkness.



## War of the Worlds

RIQ WAS appalled by what he found back in Anatolia. His guards had taken it upon themselves to torture an inmate — when they knew full well that Riq believed torture was barbaric.

He, Dak, and Sera had come out of their warp just outside of the town prison he was in charge of, and while the rapid-fire warping seemed to be difficult on Dak and Sera, it hardly fazed Riq. Maybe his body had adjusted after all the warping he'd done over the past six weeks. Or maybe it had something to do with his skin absorbing the tachyon fluid. Whatever the case, while Dak and Sera sat there half dazed, trying to shake out the cobwebs, Riq hit the ground running.

Literally.

Before his shoes even made contact with the dirt, he was already hurrying toward the prison cell, eager to speak with the old man who he now believed might know something about Tilda and her so-called AB Pacifists. But when he got to the end of the long hall, he found the prison cell completely empty. “Guards!” he shouted.

No one seemed to be around.

Riq knew something was happening. Something *big*. Tilda was close to pulling off the ultimate Break, which would change the course of

history forever.

He slammed the heel of his hand against one of the bars. Yes, he'd made a new life in ancient Greece, but his heart would always be in the future. Sometimes, he felt like he cared about it more now than ever.

He sprinted from the jail over to his living quarters. "Guards!" he shouted as he pushed his way through the front doors. "Guards! I need to speak with you immediately!"

Still no answer.

And Sera's dog didn't come running when he whistled.

Where was everybody?

Riq was staring at his bedroom wall, trying to think, when he heard one of his horses whinnying in the distance. He headed straight for the field behind the house, and sure enough, there were all six of his guards.

And his missing prisoners, too.

They were all standing around, watching his most powerful horse drag the old man — who was wearing nothing but an undershirt and undershorts — all around the dusty field.

He couldn't believe they were torturing a man old enough to be their grandfather.

"Stop right this minute!" Riq shouted.

His guards spun around. So did the prisoners, and Riq saw that their hands were tied behind their backs. "Hephaestion!" his most loyal guard, Draco, called back. "You've returned early!"

"What in the name of Alexander the Great are you *doing* to this man?" Riq demanded.

"What's going on?" Dak called out as he and Sera approached from down the hill.

"Hephaestion," the second guard said. "This man cast away the animal you left in our care."

"Are you talking about my dog?" Sera shouted. She and Dak jogged the rest of the way, joining the guards and prisoners. "What happened to



her?”

Riq lunged for the horse as it passed by in its circle, physically stopping it from dragging the old man. He untied the man’s bloody wrists and feet and helped him up, saying, “This is an absolute travesty, sir. Are you okay?”

The old man’s skin was all scratched up and covered in mud, and he was clearly dazed. Still, he managed to nod.

“Someone, get this man some water!” Riq shouted. “And his clothes! Now!”

One of the guards took off toward the prison quarters. Two of the other guards hurried over to the horse and led it away. The old man’s ankles were badly swollen where the rope had chafed the skin.

Riq cringed and turned to Draco. “What is the meaning of this?”

“It’s true what they said,” Draco pleaded. “Believe me, Hephaestion. I took the dog with me while I did my rounds, and when we got to the prison cell, the old man put a spell on her. And as the gods are my witness, the dog vanished into thin air.”

“It’s true,” one of the guards holding the rope said.

“He’s an evil sorcerer,” another guard said.

“She couldn’t have just disappeared,” Sera said. “She has to be somewhere.”

“I saw it with my own eyes,” Draco said.

Riq saw how upset Sera was, which made him feel even worse. It was his idea to leave the dog in the first place. “I assure you, Sera,” he said, “we will find her.”

She looked at the ground.

“One second, she was by my side,” Draco said, “and then she was gone. I decided it was necessary to punish the old man until he brought back the dog using his witchcraft. I didn’t want to disappoint you, sir.”

One of the guards came running back with the old man’s clothes and a cup of water. Riq helped the man dress and gave him the water. He

dismissed all of his guards, ordering them to return the rest of the prisoners back to their cell. Then he had the old man, Dak, and Sera follow him back to his living quarters.



They sat in the chairs where only hours ago Riq had crowned Abdalonymus the king of Sidon. “What did you do to the girl’s dog?” he asked, staring right into the old man’s droopy eyes.

“Not a thing,” the man answered. “But I’ll tell you this. An animal does not vanish into thin air unless someone is altering the natural course of things.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dak said.

The old man shook his head. He looked furious. “It’s all part of her evil plan,” he said, repeating the same words he’d been shouting from the minute he’d been taken into custody.

But Riq viewed them differently now.

“Whose plan?” Sera said. “Tilda?”

The man turned to her. “The woman with flaming red hair. The woman from the future.”

It felt like someone had just punched Riq right in the gut. He was speaking about Tilda, of course, and had been all along. Why hadn’t he listened to the old man earlier? “Where’d you meet her?” Riq asked him. “And what did she want?”

The old man touched his fingers around an especially large cut on his forehead. “She claimed that because of decisions made by those in power, the Earth was beginning to fall apart. If we agreed to join her group, going on a few select missions, she promised us a new kingdom in a place where the Earth’s destruction couldn’t touch us.” The old man pointed up at the ceiling.

“Space,” Riq said.

“Wait a second,” Dak said. Riq could tell by the look on his face he was starting to put it together, too. “Guess why Fake Sera took me all the way back to ancient China!”

“They were the first to invent gunpowder!” Sera said.

“Right,” Dak said. “She injected the man who actually invented gunpowder with some kind of memory-erasing drug and then took the chemicals he had combined to make gunpowder to a group of punks wearing golden robes. She wanted them to have gunpowder first.”

“And *your* double took me back to the trial of Galileo,” Sera said. “He had me defend Galileo’s belief that the Earth revolved around the sun. The heliocentric theory. And guess who rigged the trial in my favor?”

“Someone from the AB,” Dak said.

“Bingo.” Sera looked at Riq. “One of the cardinals who ruled on the case was wearing a gold-trimmed robe.”

“After China,” Dak said, hopping up out of his chair, “your evil twin took me to Aunt Effie’s farm in Massachusetts. What was happening there, you ask? Robert Goddard was testing the first liquid-fuel rocket . . . which led directly to modern-day space-travel technology.”

“Don’t you see what Tilda’s doing?” Riq asked. The hair was standing up on the back of his neck.

Sera shot up out of her seat, too. “She may have conceded the Earth after we fixed all the Breaks,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean she’s given up. Now she’s trying to colonize space.”

“She’s trying to colonize the *moon*,” the old man corrected her. “And when she does, she told us she was going to initiate a war of the worlds.”

Riq held up his hand to put the brakes on everyone’s excitement. “You understand what you two’ve done, right?” he asked.

They all looked at him.

“You’ve unknowingly altered history,” Riq said, “in *Tilda*’s favor.”

Riq watched Dak's and Sera's faces deflate, but the old man's expression didn't change at all. Riq studied him for a few long seconds before saying, "I'm curious — why didn't you follow Tilda when she promised you a new home in space? Sounds like a pretty good pitch to me."

The man's scratched-up face broke into a smile. "I was there when you three arrived in Greece. I saw the way Aristotle trusted you. I may have been born into a family of simple fishermen, but I always knew I was meant for something extraordinary, even as I got on in age. When I was approached by your woman with the flaming red hair, I realized what it was. I had to trek the twelve days it took to get here to issue my warning." He settled his gaze on Riq. "Thank you for finally listening. I was beginning to fear you didn't speak Greek at all."



# PART FIVE



## A Pebble between the Eyes

DAK MAY have wet his pants a little when he saw it.

He definitely screamed. Like, shrieked.

“Dak, outside!” Riq shouted.

But Dak was paralyzed with fear. They’d landed back in the present, in front of his house, only it no longer resembled the present he’d left only a short time ago. His barn had collapsed, and the forest was half scorched by fire, and there was a strange siren sound in the distance. But inside the house was worst of all. It looked ransacked, and his parents were nowhere to be found. Sera had dug up Dak’s old digital encyclopedia, and they were looking up what historians had recorded about their actions in China and Rome and Massachusetts when suddenly they heard a deep growl behind their backs.

The three of them spun around and found a massive *Smilodon* cat sizing them up. Sera and Riq turned and ran, but Dak froze.

The ancient cat slobbered and growled at Dak again.

He and Sera had messed things up bad.

He was as scared as he’d ever felt in his life, but he was also fascinated. This giant cat was from the Pleistocene epoch, which ended over ten thousand years ago. But it started long before that, meaning the cat bearing down on him could be from two million years ago.

“Dak, run!” Sera screamed.

When a huge paw took a swipe at him, that’s exactly what Dak did. He turned and ran, following Sera and Riq out of the house. “There’s a ladder out back!” Dak shouted.

They raced around the side of the house and flew up the ladder to the top of the house. They huddled together on the slanted roof, the *Smilodon* cat roaring at them from below.

“What do we do?” Sera said.

“Nothing,” Riq said. “Except wait.”

Dak scoffed. “Doesn’t look like it’s going anywhere soon.”

“Let’s at least pull out Dak’s encyclopedia,” Sera said. “Obviously, it’s even worse than we thought. I guess you weren’t lying about that pterosaur, Dak.”

“Or hallucinating,” Dak said, staring down at the enraged animal. It seemed content to pace for now, but if it decided to leap, they might still be in big trouble. Dak shifted his attention to his barn. Or what was *left* of his barn. The whole thing had collapsed somehow. His hammock was lying on the ground, useless. It didn’t seem like a good sign that his parents were gone and a *Smilodon* cat had moved in.

“The old man was telling the truth,” Riq said. “It says here that after successfully disproving the geocentric theory, Galileo became a celebrity — and a party animal. He never produced any more ideas.”

“That’s terrible!” Sera said. “He was supposed to publish a book in 1638. One of the most important books in the history of physics.”

“There’s nothing about that here,” Riq said. “And get this: Gunpowder was invented by the Pacifists. It took the rest of the world another half century to figure it out.”

“So what now?” Dak said.

“We have to go back and fix your mistakes,” Riq said. “And to be as efficient as possible, we’re going to have to separate.”

The three of them had warped from Anatolia to the present to see how the new Breaks — which Dak and Sera had helped create — were affecting present-day life. But Dak had never expected *this*. He saw that his mom’s campaign signs had been pulled up and trampled.

Where were his parents?

“We all have time-traveling devices,” Riq said. “So it should be fine . . . though obviously we’ll be on our own.”

“I guess Dak and I can go fix the Breaks we were there for,” Sera said. “But what about you?”

“Russia,” Riq answered.

“Russia?”

“If this is about a race to the moon,” Riq said, “then it’s going to involve America and Russia. Right, Dak?”

Dak turned to look at Riq. “Yeah, America and Russia.”

Sera shook Dak by the arm. “That’s your cue to launch into some big rant about the space race. You know, there was that Soviet rocket scientist Sergei . . .”

“Korolev,” Dak said, distracted. “The father of practical aeronautics.”

Sera waited for him to say more, and when he didn’t, she tried to goad him into it. “Oh, yeah, and because of him, weren’t the Soviets the first to launch a satellite into orbit? And then they sent an animal into space, I think. A dog. What was its name again?”

“Laika,” he said.

“Exactly!” She stared expectantly at Dak for a few long seconds, but he wasn’t in the mood. He was too worried about his parents. And his barn. And everything else that seemed to be messed up in the present because of what he and Sera had done. Oh, and there was also the fact that a five-hundred-pound cat wanted to eat them for lunch.

“Don’t you get it?” he said. “This is bigger than the Breaks. History is *shattered*. And this time, it’s all our fault.”



“Hey,” Sera said, elbowing Dak in the arm. “It’s going to be okay. This isn’t our first rodeo.”

Suddenly, a huge pterosaur emerged from the trees. Dak was almost blown off the roof when it flew over them, flapping its massive wings. It squawked so loudly, it rattled Dak’s eardrums. He turned back to Sera. “Yeah, we’ve so got this,” he said sarcastically.

“Hey, cat!” someone shouted from nearby.

Dak scanned the yard from his perch. He spotted Arin, hiding behind a tree, whistling to try to divert the massive cat’s attention. She looked up at Dak, Sera, and Riq and said, “These things are all over the forest now. I’m almost too afraid to cross through it now. *Almost.*”

“Arin!” Riq called out.

She looked up at him. “How do you know my name?”

“I don’t,” Riq said. “I just . . . Dak here told me.”

“Dak?” Arin didn’t know him either. He watched the girl shrug and pull a slingshot out of her satchel. “Let’s see if I can’t get it off your case.”

She took aim and shouted, “Hey!” When the *Smilodon* cat turned around, she fired a small rock that cracked the animal right between the eyes. It ducked its head and immediately took off out of the yard, back into the forest.

Dak climbed back down the ladder, followed by Sera and Riq. “Nice shot,” he said.

She shrugged. “I do what I have to do to survive in this crazy world.”

Dak looked at her for a while, waiting for some sign of recognition. “You don’t remember me?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Why would I?”

“Guys,” Sera said, “we should really go. Like, now.” She turned to Arin and said, “Thanks so much for what you did. We were afraid we might be there all day, and we have some urgent business to tend to.”

“Oh, don’t let me keep you,” Arin said. She picked up her stack of books from the ground, and Dak tried to see what she had. It wasn’t vampires this time, it was a bunch of dystopian novels — which made sense, considering she seemed to be living in a dystopian world. Or was it apocalyptic? He could never remember the difference between the two.

“Did you guys see that dinosaur fly over the forest just now?” Arin asked.

They all nodded.

“Well, technically,” Dak pointed out, “what we just saw was a pterosaur, but . . .”

Arin looked at him like he was crazy.

Well, it was nice that some things didn’t change.

“Can you tell us what’s been happening here?” Riq asked.

Arin glanced at Dak’s fallen barn and said, “Some really freaky things. They’ve been happening all over the world, actually. Ancient pirate ships have been spotted off the coasts. Dinosaurs — the *real* kind — have been walking down highways in the middle of the day.” She pointed toward Dak’s barn. “This place was actually trampled by a sauropod, which, I don’t know if you know this —”

“It’s the largest dinosaur that ever lived,” Dak said, finishing her sentence. “That’s what happened to my parents’ barn? A *dinosaur* stepped on it?”

“Guys, we should really fix these Breaks right away,” Sera said. “Something tells me we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Do you have any idea where my parents could have gone?” Dak asked Arin. “They lived here.”

“A lot of people drove toward the mountains or are hiding out in bomb shelters.” Arin looked to Sera. “Where are you guys going anyway? Maybe I can help.”

“You can,” Riq said. “Tell us what you know about current space travel. We were looking through the encyclopedia, but we can’t find any

information.”

“The Pacifists are pretty secretive,” Arin said, “but stuff leaks.”

“Any information you can give us would be a help,” Dak said.

“You know how the Pacifists established a colony on the moon in the nineties?” Arin said. When there was no recognition on any of their faces, she said, “Wait, you don’t even know about *that*? Have you been living under a rock?”

“Something like that,” Riq said.

“Okay, I’ll give you the CliffsNotes version,” Arin said. “The Pacifists have been living up there for over a year now, while their scientists try to create a permanent atmosphere. And it turns out they’re not as into peace as their name suggests. It’s just been reported that they’ve built nuclear weapons up there, and they’re threatening to wipe out everyone on Earth if they don’t get what they want.”

“And what do they want?” Riq asked.

“Absolute power.”

Dak looked up at the sky. It was still sunny out, so he couldn’t see the moon, but the thought of a nuke launching toward the Earth from space was almost incomprehensible. It snapped him out of his mood. Yes, his parents were gone — *again* — and he had no idea where they were, but the situation was dire for everyone, not just him. “Guys,” he said to Sera and Riq, “we need to do this *now*.”

“Thanks for your help,” Riq said to Arin.

“Wait. I have one last question,” Sera said. “Where are these Pacifists sending up their spacecraft from?”

“I heard it was some island in Europe,” Arin said. “Though nobody knows for sure. Like I said, they’re very secretive for security purposes.”

Sera looked at Dak and Riq. “Santorini. Should we agree to meet there on a certain day?”

Riq did a quick search on Dak’s digital encyclopedia. In a few seconds, he looked up and said, “July 16, 1969. Hey, isn’t that when

America first put a man on the moon?”

Dak’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! The one small step didn’t happen until July 20. But the launch itself was July 16.”

“What are you talking about?” Arin said. “America has never put a man on the moon. Nobody else has. That’s why everyone marvels at the Pacifists. There’s a reason their rockets are lined with gold, or so the joke goes.”

Dak shook his head, remembering all the Dak and Sera duplicates they’d seen on Santorini. He wondered how many had ended up on the moon. Maybe that had something to do with his dream about being in space.

After a long stretch of silence, Arin said, “Okay, I guess I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Dak watched her walk away. She seemed to genuinely want to help, and he wondered if they could have included her more somehow. He turned back to Sera and Riq, who were already preparing for their respective warps. Sera was programming her Ring, and Riq was staring at his arm and taking these weird, deep yoga breaths.

“Are we ready, then?” Sera said.

Riq nodded.

“I still don’t understand how you can warp without a Ring,” Dak said.

“That makes two of us,” Riq answered.

They both turned to Sera, the science whiz, but all she did was shrug.

“Anyway,” Riq said. “I guess it’s time. Good luck to you guys.”

“Good luck,” Dak and Sera both said at the same time.

Dak programmed his own Ring.

They looked at one another for several seconds, like they didn’t want to split up now that they were finally back together. “I’m sorry I doubted you,” Dak told Sera.

“It’s my fault,” Sera responded. “I knew it couldn’t be the real you.”

Now that they were going to split up again, Dak felt his heart swell. The three of them just stared at one another for a few long seconds. Then they laughed a little, even with everything hanging over their heads. These two were like family to him now.

Sera was the first one to hit her `ACTIVATE` button, and in seconds she disappeared.

Riq was next. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, and his whole body began trembling. Then, *poof*, he was gone, too.

Dak looked at his fallen barn one more time. His house, which no longer held his parents. And then he stared at the half-torched forest. Finally, he hit the `ACTIVATE` button, and the world around him began to spin — though he now knew, from watching Sera and Riq warp away without him, that the spinning happened only on the inside. The last thing Dak saw before he closed his eyes and gave himself to the warp was Arin, who was once again hiding behind a tree on his parents' property, watching him.

And then he was gone.



## Separate but Equal

SERA LANDED in seventeenth-century Rome, right before the trial of Galileo. She hurried up to the doors of the courtroom where she saw herself and Dak trying to get in, and the guards who barred their way.

She experienced something beyond *déjà vu*.

It was impossible to describe what it was like to see herself there, with Dak, looking so uncertain. She had been so naïve in that moment. But at least she'd had her no-name dog. She missed her so much. Maybe she could fix the Break she had created *and* get her dog back.

But first she had to concentrate on fixing her mistake.

She watched the group of AB Pacifists step up to the guards and talk to them in quiet voices, and then the guards stepped aside, letting Dak and Sera into the courtroom where Sera would testify on Galileo's behalf. Sera followed herself inside, looking for her opportunity to replace this earlier version of herself. And then she remembered how light-headed she'd felt before getting Dak's translation device. Her body had been fighting off the effects of the tamales. That was her opening.

She followed closely behind them, and she saw herself falter and go down on one knee, just as she remembered. Sera darted forward and

touched her duplicate lightly on the ankle. Her previous self disintegrated into thin air. And so did her dog. It happened in an instant.

Sera had expected the other version of herself to fade out, just like what had happened to Dak's duplicate at the school. Everything she knew about quantum theory suggested that the time stream hated a paradox. Two versions of the same person were not supposed to be in the same place at the same time. Given the chance, time would fix itself. But as long as she had a Ring on her, she could stay right where she was. Or *when* she was.

The dog was another matter. Why had she faded out again? Sera was beginning to suspect someone else's hand at work there.

One second they were there, the next they were gone.

There was no time to wonder about it, though, because right at that second Dak spun around, ready to swap his translation device into her ear, except she wasn't right behind him like he expected.

"Sera?" he called out.

Sera ripped out her own translation device, shoved it in her pocket, and sprinted over to him, saying, "I'm right here." The dog sniffed her suspiciously, but seemed content. Sera smelled like Sera despite the swap.

"Come on," Dak said anxiously. "They're just about to issue their verdict." He stopped her near the back row of chairs and transferred the translation device from his ear into Sera's — which was still gross — just as one of the cardinals slammed his gavel against the table.

"We have our verdict," the man announced.

Everything was happening just like she remembered it. Only now she understood what the outcome of her defense would be. Galileo, this man who was her idol, who had advanced science in so many profound ways, would turn his back on his work because of his newfound popularity. She looked at him now.

She had to save him by *not* saving him.

“By majority vote,” the cardinal went on, “we find the defendant, Galileo Galilei —”

“Wait!” Dak said, leaping out from behind the last row of chairs. Everyone spun around to look at him. “My friend here, Sera Froste . . . she has something to say. Right, Sera?”

The fake Dak leaned in close to her and said, “What are you waiting for? Do it now.”

The man pounded his gavel again and said, “The court does not appreciate interruptions such as this. Guards, have them removed immediately.”

“Let her have her say,” the cardinal with the gold-trimmed robe called out. “We must have all evidence in order to make the proper decision.”

The first cardinal turned to Sera, clearly angry, and said, “Well?”

Could Sera really do this? Could she give incorrect testimony in order to make sure Galileo was punished? Because that was what she’d have to do in order to keep him on track to becoming the scientific giant he was supposed to become. But could she really lie in court?

Sera stepped forward and announced, “Galileo is wrong about the heliocentric theory, and I can prove it!”

There was a buzz in the courtroom.

The cardinal in the gold-trimmed robe stepped up and said, “Throw her out of court immediately! She has no right to speak!”

The other cardinals disagreed, though. “Let the girl speak!” one of them insisted.

“She should be allowed to have her say,” said another. “Just like you pointed out a second ago.”

The first cardinal pounded his gavel especially hard to quiet the crowd. “The floor is yours, young woman, but be quick about it.”

Sera took a deep breath and let it out slow. She looked at Galileo, then at her dog. Then she turned back to the cardinals and began



speaking out against her idol.



Riq was no history buff, but something he read in Dak's electronic encyclopedia had really struck him. According to the section he read about the space race, the USSR had never accomplished much. The encyclopedia entry said that they were making progress at first, along with America and the AB Pacifists, until a particular launch went horribly wrong. They had tried launching a dog named Laika into space in an attempt to determine whether space travel was safe for living things. But Laika's spacecraft exploded into a million pieces long before it left Earth's atmosphere, and the entire Russian space program was dismantled as a result. According to the encyclopedia entry, Russia's top scientists and rocket engineers were ordered to never look toward space again.

But Riq knew this was all wrong. He didn't know how the Pacifists had rigged it, but he knew he had to warp back to the launch of that dog. He trusted that he'd be able to figure out *something*.

He landed as close to the launch site as he dared. Even if he didn't have Pacifists to worry about, Soviet security was bound to be intense. He had to be ready for anything.

What he wasn't ready for was the dog. It came out of nowhere: a cute, energetic mutt running straight for him. Before he could react, the dog ran circles around him, sniffing at his feet and yipping excitedly.

It was the same dog his men had managed to lose in Anatolia. "What in the world are you doing here?" he said.

"She's with us," a woman's voice answered.

Riq tensed. The dog ran away from him and heeled beside an older couple, a man and a woman with smatterings of gray in their jet-black hair.

The man smiled. "Riq, right?"

Riq pointed at himself. "Me? Yeah, I'm Riq. Who are you?"

This time the woman spoke up. "We're Sera Froste's parents."

Riq's stomach dropped. He didn't know much about these people, but from what he'd gathered, they couldn't be trusted. He scanned their outfits for gold, but saw none.

"Don't worry," Sera's father said. "Everything's taken care of here. The launch will go as planned and the Soviet space program will proceed."

"Well, with one small alteration," Sera's mother said, patting the dog on the head.

"And I'm supposed to just take your word for it?" Riq said.

"We're on your side, Riq," Mr. Froste said. "Tilda came to us. She wanted to blackmail us into helping her rebuild her empire. But we saw an opportunity to thwart her plans from the inside."

"We let our daughter believe we had crossed back over to the SQ," Mrs. Froste added. "We had to do it. To protect her."

"To *protect* her?" Riq said. "Do you know what she's doing right now? She's warping through time, risking her life. Again!"

Mr. Froste lowered his head, like this hit him hard.

"Our little girl is quite capable," Mrs. Froste said. "So capable that we had to sabotage her experiments until everything was in place."

Riq shot daggers at her. "I can't believe you put her through all that. Your daughter is the smartest, most loyal person I've ever met. But you wouldn't know that because you're never around. And you let her think you were actually her enemies? That you didn't care about her?"

"She's the only thing we care about," Mrs. Froste countered. "How do you think Tilda got to us in the first place? She threatened Sera. She said she could get to her any time. Even find her as a baby in her crib."

Riq's anger faltered.

“We’ve done the best we could,” Mr. Froste said, “with a bad situation. When Tilda forced us to reproduce the Infinity Ring, we made sure the DNA lock remained in place. When she worked around that by pulling alternate versions of the kids from branches of the time stream, we sabotaged her by making it so that the Rings could tell the difference between the real Sera, the real Dak, and the alternates.”

“Think of it as temporal DNA,” Mrs. Froste said. “Those duplicates have the same genes as the kids, but their chronal signatures are totally different.”

“If you say so,” Riq said. It was a lot to swallow.

“But that’s not the best part,” she added. “Riq, you’re our secret weapon.”

“Me?” he said.

“Let me ask you a question,” Sera’s mom said. “Don’t you think it’s odd that you’re able to warp around through time without an Infinity Ring?”

“It’s because I splashed tachyon fluid all over myself,” Riq said.

Sera’s dad shook his head. “That alone wouldn’t get you anywhere. That’s the fuel, but it’s useless without an engine. But we knew we could trust you to undermine Tilda and keep her busy while we made our move.”

“So we found you in Greece when you were asleep one night,” his wife said. She pointed at Riq’s shoulder. “And we planted a microchip in your arm that would allow you to warp anywhere at any time.”

“Including the twenty-first century,” Mr. Froste said. “You can go home again, Riq.”

Riq remembered the inexplicable scar on his right shoulder. He realized he’d just visited the future, messed up though it was, and hadn’t suffered any ill effects. Maybe they were telling the truth. He watched as the dog sniffed around a fence a few yards away. “And you abducted Sera’s dog because . . . ?”

“We’re the ones who left the dog for her in the first place,” the woman explained, pulling a small silver device from her pocket. “Watch this. Here, girl!” She pressed a button on the device and the dog vanished, reappearing a moment later at Mrs. Froste’s feet.

“Quantum leash,” she said. “For the Soviet space program to continue as it’s meant to, this dog has to go up in that ship. But there’s no reason she has to die up there.”

“You were right about one thing, Riq” Sera’s dad said. “We weren’t there for our daughter. And we owe you more than we can say for standing by her through all of this.”

“But if we beat Tilda once and for all, we can finally be the parents she deserves,” Mrs. Froste said. “What do you say?”

Riq only hesitated for a moment. Then he broke out into a smile. “I say let’s do this. For Sera. And everybody else.”



Dak stopped to watch the men meditating in the Buddhist temple in ancient China. He wondered if they’d ever defeat Tilda once and for all. Because this seemed like a better, more peaceful way to live. Imagine if everyone had inner peace. Not just the people who entered temples like this. He then walked through the entrance of the dark and dingy warehouse for a second time.

A flood of images jockeyed for position in his brain as he moved through the long hallway. The alchemist. The boy with the birthmark. The bad piece of Gouda. When he approached the door to the alchemist’s workshop, he saw the boy standing there with a less-informed version of himself. Now it seemed idiotic to him that he hadn’t known he was trying to track down a fake Sera. But at the time he’d genuinely thought it was his best friend.

He looked over the shoulder of the boy and the naïve Dak and saw, once again, the alchemist add a chemical to a small bowl made of stone, which resulted in a minor explosion that made the old man and fake Sera leap back from the workbench. The man spoke excitedly, and this time, Dak could understand him.

This man had just discovered the chemical composition of gunpowder, which would change the world forever. Except the fake Sera wanted the AB Pacifists to have that technology first. Dak wouldn't let that happen.

He reached out and tapped his younger self on the shoulder, ready to make his move. But it turned out he didn't have to do much. He watched in shock as the other version of himself disintegrated into thin air. Dak stood there, eyes bugging out of his head, until he noticed the boy bringing the piece of Gouda up to his mouth. That's when Dak sprang into action.

He reached for the kid and knocked the cheese out of his hand, saying, "Don't eat that; it's poisoned." The boy gave him a strange look but after a few seconds he nodded, and Dak knew the translation device was doing its job.

When Dak turned his attention back to the workshop, he saw Sera pulling out her syringe and aiming it at her victim's neck. Dak ran toward them and dove through the air, tackling Sera's duplicate just before the needle penetrated the old man's flesh. The syringe crashed to the ground and rolled to the wall, useless.

Dak and Sera tumbled to the ground together, and Dak rolled on top of her and pinned her arms. Sera looked up at him and shouted, "What are you doing, Dak?"

"Making things right," he told her.

He motioned to the boy. "Bring me the rope from the shelf by your feet. Hurry."

The boy came with the rope, and together they tied up the fake Sera's arms and legs, and Dak stood up.

"You'll never get away with this," she told him. Although she was tied up so thoroughly that she couldn't even move her hands and feet, a smile came over her face. "There are thousands more just like me. And we will win. And when we win, you will pay."

"We'll see about that," Dak said. Then he turned his attention back to the boy. "Get this man to safety. I will take care of the girl."

He watched the boy take the alchemist by the arm and start leading him away. He looked at Sera, whose eyes were furious. With her detained in China, Robert Goddard would be safe in Massachusetts.

That meant they had only one task left. But it was a big one.



## Prelaunch

“WELL, THIS is a new one,” Sera said. She and Dak were standing outside the towering barbwire fence that protected the AB Pacifists’ launch site.

“What do you mean?” Dak said.

Sera motioned toward her gear from seventeenth-century Rome. “Usually, we’re trying to find clothes that make us look like everyone else,” she said. “This time, Riq’s out there trying to find us clothes that’ll make us look like . . . us.”

Dak glanced down at his robe from ancient China. “I just hope he hurries. It looks like these Pacifist dudes are close to getting started.”

The first part of their plan had worked perfectly. The three of them had fixed their respective Breaks — separately — and then successfully warped to Santorini, on July 16, 1969. Now for the most important part: stopping the Pacifists from getting to the moon.

Through the fence, Sera watched several dozen Dak and Sera dupes milling around, doing checks on their spacecraft, and observing the weather and transporting supplies into the cockpit and fueling the engine. Sera knew what was at stake. They all did. Even with the other Breaks fixed, if they let this vessel get into orbit, Tilda would colonize the moon

with her Pacifists, and once their settlement was up and running, they would turn their attention toward the Earth.

“I still can’t believe we doubted each other,” Dak said, looking at Sera. “Never again, okay?”

“Never again,” Sera agreed. It was still strange to hear Dak being so . . . nice. She remembered the fake Dak apologizing to her back home. But this time was different. She knew it was really him, and it meant so much. “I have to admit something,” she told him. “I’ve never felt so alone as when I thought I’d lost my best friend.”

“It was the same for me,” Dak said.

“Let’s not start patting one another on the back just yet, okay?” Riq said, walking up behind them. He tossed them each some clothes and stepped up to the fence. “We still have to make sure we can get you two inside this fortress.”

It didn’t matter how many times Sera came to this island; she didn’t think she’d ever get used to how weird it was watching so many people who looked just like her running around. People who *were* just like her, probably, before Tilda had gotten her claws into them. It saddened her to think of it: infinite possibilities, and so many of them ruined by one woman.

“So when are you going to fill us in on this plan of yours? Dak asked Riq.

“On the way to the portables.”

“Portables?” Dak said. “As in . . . portable bathrooms? I think I’ll pass, thanks.”

“Just come on,” Riq said.

Sera shrugged and followed Riq.

Dak did, too. Reluctantly.





Sera put on the clothes Riq had given her and studied herself in the tiny portable-bathroom mirror. She looked just like herself, which meant she looked like every other Sera cruising around on the entire island. Even though technically it was 1969, the Daks and Seras were all from the twenty-first century, and they all had scarily identical fashion sense.

Sera left her clothes from Rome on top of the toilet and left her portable. On her way to meet up with the two boys, she reviewed her part of Riq's plan. She and Dak were going to try and get past security by pretending to be technicians. Once they got inside, they were going to split up. Again. Her job was to talk her way into the control center. Dak was the one who had the more dangerous job. He was going to try and get onto the actual spacecraft.

"You ready?" Riq asked when Sera caught up to them.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she said.

"And you?" he said to Dak.

"One day, you'll figure this out about me, big guy," Dak answered. "I'm always ready when it comes to saving the world."

"That's what I like to hear," Riq said. "Okay, the security checkpoint is about a hundred yards to my left. Remember what I said: As long as you act like you know what you're doing, people will assume you belong. Obviously you both look the part. But you'll have to hurry. There's not much time."

Dak and Sera barely spoke on the long walk to the security checkpoint. For Sera, it was nerves. She knew this was probably the most ambitious thing they'd ever tried to do. It wasn't every day you tried to hijack a space mission. But she was also nervous for Dak. She had faith in him, and he'd grown a lot since they'd linked up with the Hystorians. But this was one tough job Riq had assigned to him.

Then again, they were going to war. And Riq had experience *winning* wars. She had faith in him, too.

Sera pulled the wristband out of her jeans when the checkpoint was only about a hundred feet away. She slipped it on and said, “Ready?”

She watched Dak slip his wristband on, too. “Ready,” he said.

But he looked scared. And that made Sera scared. She grabbed him by the arm and stopped him. “Hey,” she said. “You okay? I’ll be right there in the control center, watching everything.”

“Eight minutes until launch!” a woman’s voice said over the loudspeaker. “Positions!”

“I know you will,” Dak said.

They walked up to the checkpoint, making small talk, and tried to walk right through.

“Excuse me?” an older version of Sera said. “Wristbands?”

“Oh, sorry,” Sera said, moving her arm toward the teen girl.

The girl checked her wrist and rolled her eyes. “You should know better than to try and just walk through a checkpoint.”

“I totally wasn’t thinking,” Sera said.

“Obviously,” the girl said, looking at Dak’s wristband. “You should surprise us all and try it sometime.”

Sera grinned through the whole exchange, even though she really wanted to give the teen version of herself a piece of her mind. But what did it matter? The girl waved them through the gate. And that’s all they really wanted. The wristbands Riq scored for them were legit.

They found themselves surrounded by dozens of duplicates, maybe hundreds, all of them rushing around doing some job. All of them pulled from their homes, their realities, by Tilda. It was surreal. Sera couldn’t believe how much things had changed from their first warp.

But there was one thing Dak, Sera, and the AB all had in common. They liked order. The movement of the crowd wasn’t as chaotic as it appeared. Everyone had a task. Everything was labeled. And signs led the real Dak and Sera to the ready room, where they easily overpowered a Dak dupe as he suited up for space travel.

Dak took the gear for himself as his double vanished, returning home.

“Five minutes until launch!” the announcer said. Something about the voice made Sera’s skin crawl.

“If I die up there,” Dak said, “you can have my hammock.”

“You’re not gonna die, Dak.” Sera patted him on the shoulder awkwardly. “You’re like a roach. Nothing can kill you.”

“Oh, great. Thanks.”

“You know what I mean,” Sera said. “Seriously, though, be careful.”

Dak nodded. “You’ll be able to make it to the control room yourself?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sera said. “You can count on me.”

“I know,” he said.

He started to leave when Sera said, “And, Dak?”

He turned around to face her.

“I really do feel lucky to have you as a best friend.”

A small smile broke on Dak’s face. “Thanks.”

A whole sea of butterflies started flapping around in Sera’s stomach as she watched Dak hurry out of the room. Not because their mission depended on what happened next. But because Sera wanted more than anything for Dak to be okay.

Sera made her way quickly and quietly to the control room. It was set up like a NASA control center she’d seen in movies. In fact, it reminded her a little bit of the Hystorian Operations Center, where she’d first met Riq and Arin way back when this had all begun.

She wasn’t surprised to find the room populated with versions of herself. After all, if you had to put either Dak or her in front of a computer, she was the obvious choice.

What did surprise her was the woman at the very center of the room, overlooking the entire operation. The woman was old. Very old. And

frail-looking. She sat hunched in a wheelchair. She had plastic tubes running fluids into her arm.

Sera might have assumed she was getting a glimpse of herself in old age. But there was no mistaking the hate burning in the woman's cloudy eyes. Or the shade of red she'd used to dye the very tips of her stringy white hair.

It was Tilda. And she had to be a hundred years old.

"Commence countdown!" she barked, and her raspy voice was broadcast across the base. "Ten! Nine . . ."

Sera had expected a fight. She had expected to face Tilda one last time in heated battle. But this woman had already lost. She'd spent her entire life warping back and forth through time and across dimensions, manipulating everyone she came in contact with. She'd been consumed with hatred and jealousy and master plans. And now all she had left was a final, desperate gambit to control Earth's future by controlling the moon.

Sera felt pity for the woman, but there was no way she would sit back and let that happen.

The spacecraft's engine began to roar as Tilda counted down. When she reached zero, there was a sound of explosions as huge balls of fire flared from beneath the ship. Sera knew the solid rocket booster had ignited. She knew she was witnessing the almost-miraculous result of millennia of human progress. She felt a sense of wonder at how many little moments in history had all led to this one great moment.

Her heart climbed into her throat as the spacecraft launched into the air, speeding toward space.

"Good luck, Dak," she said.

And then she leisurely strolled up to a control panel, right under the nose of her greatest enemy, and steered her best friend's spacecraft into the path of an oncoming asteroid.



## Trip to the Moon

THE HEAT from the fire was unbearable as Dak tried to claw his way out of the elaborate seat belt. Sweat streamed down his face. It soaked his shirt and pants underneath his bulky suit. It even soaked the protective diaper he'd been forced to wear by the Pacifist space authority — which turned out to be an ideal hiding place for the golden Infinity Ring. It was the diaper that triggered his memory. Dak realized this was exactly like the dream he'd had while he was safe in his hammock.

It had been a Remnant of a sort. A glimpse of things that could or would or should happen. A sign that history had been manipulated again. That it was breaking.

But this time, he was happy for it. Because he knew almost everything that was going to happen before it happened.

He knew when he glanced at the fire, it would be inching closer to the control panel, which meant it was inching closer to him.

He needed to get out of the way *now!*

He knew the fire had started when a few exposed fan wires shorted, igniting the Teflon insulation in the pure oxygen environment. But he now also knew the fire caught because he'd started it. It was all part of their plan.

“Come on!” Dak shouted, like he knew he would, as the belt slipped out of his sweaty fingers again. A drop of sweat ran into his right eye, momentarily blurring his vision. He blinked away the stinging sensation, knowing that when he looked to his left, he’d find two other astronauts — both Dak clones only a year or two older than him — peering out the window, screaming like little babies. “Uh, little help over here?” Dak shouted.

But he knew they wouldn’t even turn around.

He heard a low buzzing sound, barely audible over the screams, and unlike in his dream, this time he knew it was one of those flying Squares that the Pacifists had used to spy on him and Sera. He didn’t see where it was, but it didn’t matter. There wasn’t going to be anything salvageable anyway.

When Dak was finally able to free himself, he drifted awkwardly out of the cockpit, toward the wall with the fire extinguisher. He snatched it in his gloves, removed the safety, and aimed the nozzle at the angry blue flame, which now claimed almost a third of the cockpit. But now he knew that this was all for show. The other Dak astronauts turned and saw him trying to put out the fire, and that was all that mattered.

The older duplicates started screaming even louder, this time diving toward the center of the cockpit, near the fire, holding on to each other. Dak chucked the extinguisher to the side and bounded over to the window to see for himself.

And suddenly he was screaming, too.

Because even though he knew what he would find, it was still insane to see a massive asteroid, more than twice the size of their vessel, spinning recklessly through space directly toward them.

Instead of panicking, Dak locked the manual controls. Once he was sure there was going to be a collision, he pulled his golden Infinity Ring out of his diaper and programmed it to the present. He was just about to

hit the `ACTIVATE` button when he looked at the two older Daks. They weren't on his side, but he couldn't just leave them.

He leapt through the growing fire and slapped them on the backs of their heads. They were gone in an instant and an eerie silence descended in the moment before impact.

The asteroid slammed into the Pacifist spacecraft just as the one true Dak Symth was sucked back into the warp.



## Homecoming

A WEEK later, Riq was finally able to return to the present for good. He walked leisurely toward Dak's place, enjoying the nice weather and the total absence of bloodthirsty warriors. It was a pleasant change.

After Dak had warped back from outer space in one piece and they had judged their mission a success, Riq had gone directly back to Anatolia to tie up some loose ends. He was finally able to release the remainder of his war prisoners, whom he personally led back into the heart of Persia. He also awarded the old man who'd informed him about Tilda's plan a place in Alexander the Great's cabinet. And then he had a long talk with Alexander himself, about his plan to leave the era for good. He was worried that his friend would be disappointed, but Alexander only patted him on the back and said, "Go and do what makes you happy, Hephaestion."

Riq felt nostalgic now, realizing he'd never be called by that name again.

But that wasn't all he had taken care of in the time since they'd thwarted the plan to colonize the moon. He also made one final trip to Izamal, where he broke every Hystorian rule in the book.



He spoke to Kisa. He had to. It wasn't a long conversation, and he didn't give away too much about the future, but he did reveal that she was the reason he had chosen to go home. He wanted to find whatever family he had left in the present and build a life with them. Because when he was in Izamal he had learned that it isn't enough to simply commit yourself to a cause. In order to appreciate how truly wonderful a life on this Earth is, you must also know love. He told her that *she* had taught him that. They hugged briefly and then Riq said his good-byes.

Of course, he was never going to mention that detour to Dak, whom he now spotted lying in some sort of hammock outside his house. Sera was there, too, sitting on the grass, petting her dog. He was excited to see them again and called out, "Long time, no see!"

Dak and Sera both looked up and said, "Riq!"

"We were just talking about you," Sera said.

Riq gave Sera a quick hug and slapped hands with Dak. He sat down on the grass next to Sera and her dog.

"All that time I had no idea what her name was," Sera said. "Watch this. Laika, come give mamma some love!"

Riq watched the dog jump on Sera and start licking her face over and over. Sera was laughing and pushing her away, but Riq could tell Sera loved every second of it. "So, you asked your parents for a pet and they got you the famous Soviet space dog?"

"She's the best dog in history," Sera said. "I'm so glad they were able to save her without causing a Break."

"They're suckers for animals, just like Sera," Dak added. "They said they couldn't let a dog get hurt in the name of science."

"So, everything's okay with them?" Riq asked.

"Everything's great," Sera said.

"They're like the model family of the year," Dak said.

Riq smiled, marveling at the foresight of Sera's parents. He touched his shoulder where they'd installed the microchip that allowed him to

warp around through time. He made a mental note to thank them in person before he began searching for any long-lost family members of his own.

“And everything seems to be normal again in the present?” Riq asked.

“So far, so good,” Sera said. “No dinosaur sightings yet.”

“Or pterosaur sightings,” Dak put in.

Sera rolled her eyes. “Exactly. I only worry that Dak’s going to get bored again.”

“No way,” Dak said. “I learned my lesson. I’m content to hang out. With my friends.” He looked directly at Riq. “We’re so glad you’re back here, man. Even though you are kind of a pain sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Sera said. “I mean, I’m glad you’re here. Not the part about you being a pain.”

The three of them got quiet for a few seconds after that. Riq cleared his throat, about to tell them his plans for the future, when he heard the voice of a girl behind him.

“Excuse me?” It was Arin, standing at the bottom of the driveway. “Does anyone know where I can find a Mr. and Mrs. Froste?”

Riq and Dak looked at Sera who said, “Uh, yeah. Why?”

“They told me to meet them here this afternoon. Apparently they want to discuss a job. Something that could ‘really make history.’ Their words.”

Riq saw Dak and Sera grin at each other.

“Follow us,” Sera said, standing up and grabbing Laika’s leash. “They’ve got a lab set up in the barn. And we’re going to help them test their latest invention.”

“We are?” Riq asked. “Wait. What are you two up to?”

“Riq, Riq, Riq,” said Dak. He put an arm around the older boy’s shoulder. “Let me ask you a question: Why would anybody want to study history when they could live it?”

“What was all that about learning your lesson?” he asked pointedly. But he grinned as he asked it.

“We did learn a lesson,” Dak said. “Stick together.”

“And when it comes to history: Look, don’t touch,” Sera added.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Dak asked. He squeezed Riq’s shoulder and ran ahead to join Sera.

Riq watched Dak, Sera, Arin, and Laika start toward the barn together. He was torn. Mere moments ago, he’d been ready to leave the life of adventure behind him. To settle down. Be a normal kid again.

But he had never really been a normal kid, had he? None of them had.

Sera turned around. “You coming?”

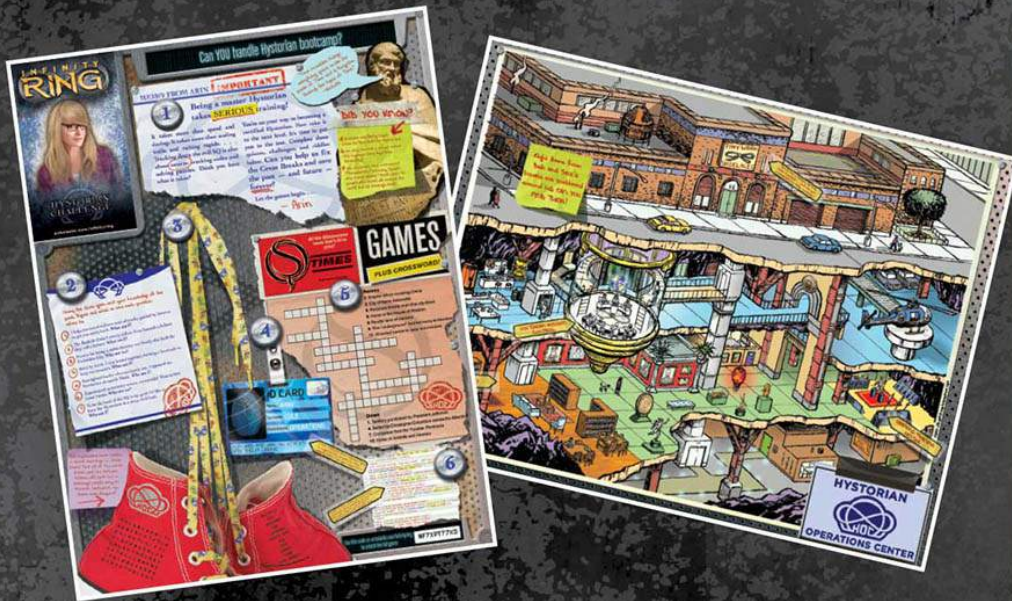
He rubbed his shoulder, then smiled, setting off toward the door that Sera was holding open for him.



**THE END**

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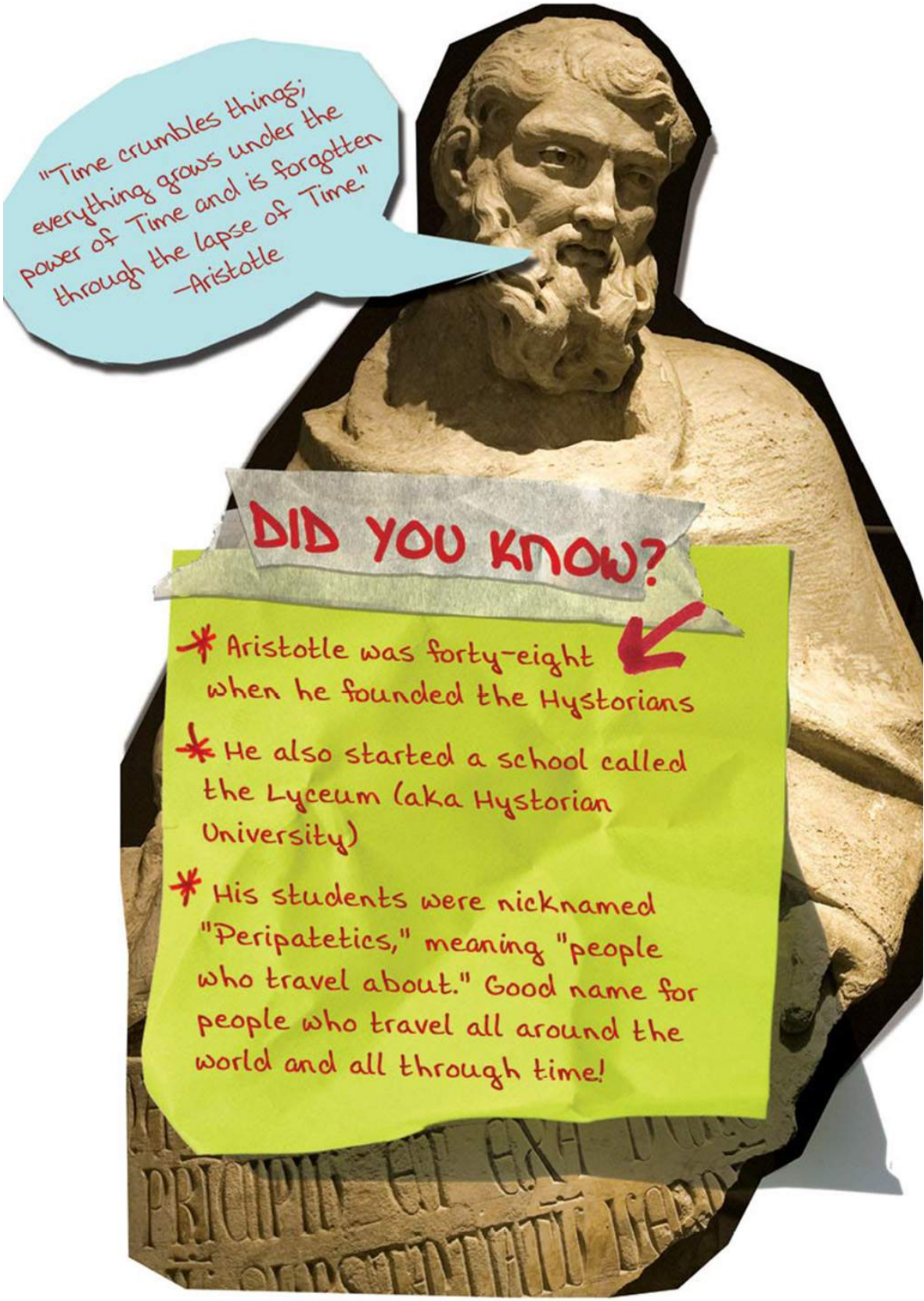
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—Arin



A stone bust of Aristotle is the central focus. A light blue speech bubble is positioned to the left of the bust, containing a quote. A yellow sticky note is attached to the front of the bust, featuring a red banner at the top and three bullet points. The bust is set against a black background.

"Time crumbles things;  
everything grows under the  
power of Time and is forgotten  
through the lapse of Time."  
-Aristotle

## DID YOU KNOW?

- \* Aristotle was forty-eight when he founded the Hystorians 
- \* He also started a school called the Lyceum (aka Hystorian University)
- \* His students were nicknamed "Peripatetics," meaning "people who travel about." Good name for people who travel all around the world and all through time!




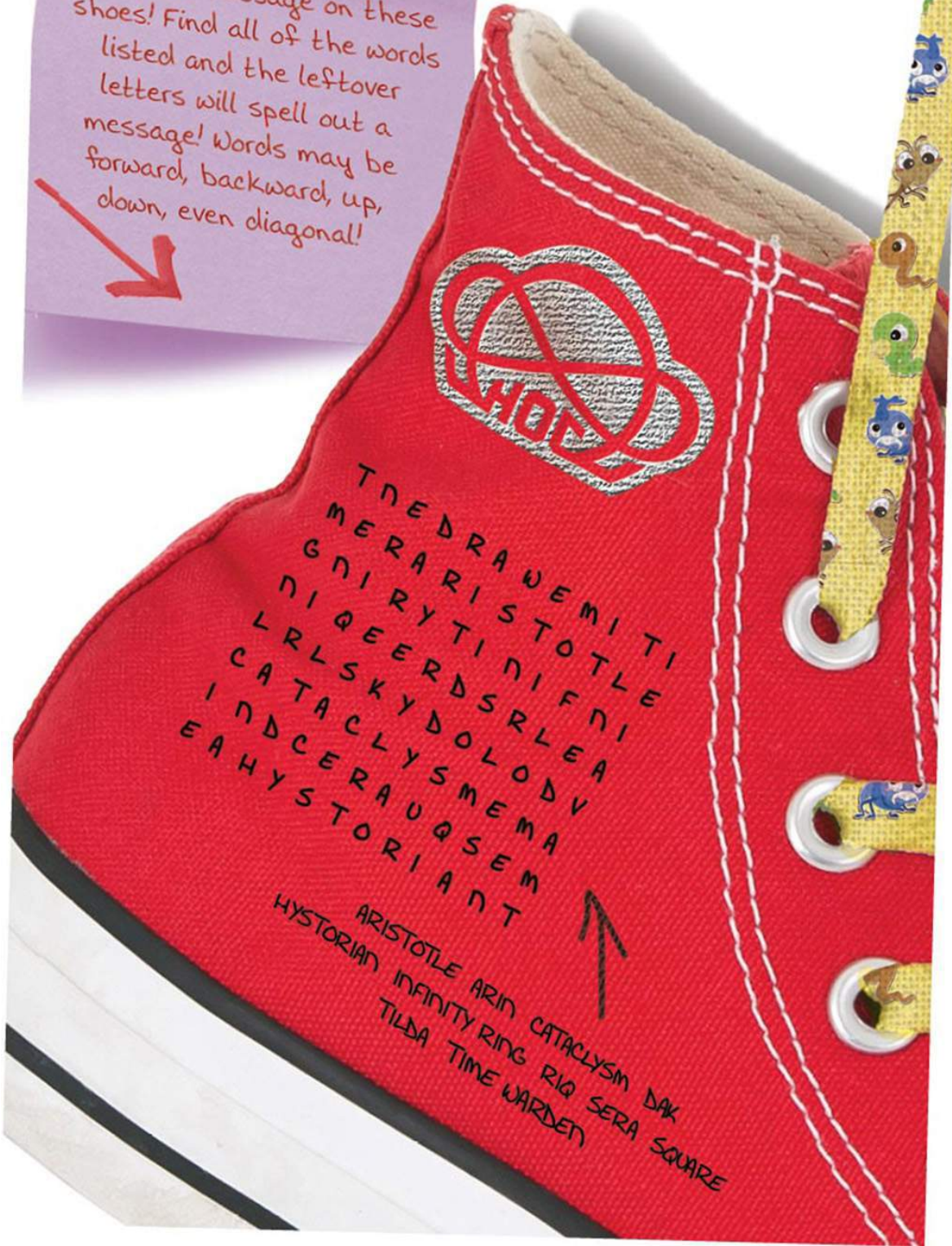


Using the clues given and your knowledge of the past, figure out what or who each question refers to.

- ① I help you travel without need of tracks, guided by lanterns to get you safely back. **What am I?**
- ② The Bushido Code I strictly follow, from beneath a helmet they call a kabuto. **What am I?**
- ③ Known for being a stable dynasty, our family also built the Forbidden City. **Who are we?**
- ④ Brick by brick, I was bound together, forming a barricade to keep out invaders. **What am I?**
- ⑤ Nearsighted leader who can barely see, I opposed the Revolution alongside Marie. **Who am I?**
- ⑥ Experienced as territory scouts, we traveled West to find water routes. **Who are we?**
- ⑦ To be the head of the SQ is my goal; I'd like to bury the Hystorians in a deep, dark hole. **Who am I?**



The Hystorians have hidden a secret message on these shoes! Find all of the words listed and the leftover letters will spell out a message! Words may be forward, backward, up, down, even diagonal!

TNEDRAWEMITI  
 MERARISTOTLE  
 GNIRYTNIFNI  
 NIQEERDSRLEA  
 LRLSKYDOLODV  
 CATACLYSMEMA  
 INDCERAUQSEM  
 EAHYSTORIAN T



ARISTOTLE ARIN CATACLYSM DAK  
 HYSTORIAN INFINITY RING RIO SERA SQUARE  
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# GAMES

**PLUS CROSSWORD!**

**Across**

2. Empire set on invading China
3. City of Marie Antoinette
5. Redcoats tried to burn this city down
6. Home of the House of Wisdom
8. Feudal land of warriors
9. This "underground" trail led many to freedom
11. Guarded barrier to keep out invaders

**Down**

1. Territory purchased by President Jefferson
4. Sailed by Christopher Columbus across the Atlantic
7. Civilization from the Yucatan Peninsula
10. Home of Aristotle and Hermes



Some of the words of this secret message were jumbled in transmission. Can you figure out what the highlighted words should say?

```
108 <a class="nav-button" data-redirect-to="/myhero" href="/plus/login">Oh man! An ill crab.</a>  
109 <div class='divider'></div>  
110 <div class='column top-nav-item' id='nav-friends'>  
111 <a class="nav-button" data-redirect-to="/friends" href="/plus/login">Hairy snot</a>  
112 <div class='divider'></div>  
113 <div class='drop-down-mask' id='friends-mask' style= <div class="nav-button" data-redirect-to="/friends" data-redirect-to="/plus/login">Hated for ill</a>  
114 <div class="column drop-down-item">  
115 <div class='drop-down-left'></div>  
116 <span class='left-edge-drop-down'></span>  
117 <a class="drop-down-button left-button" data-redirect-to="/plus/login" data-toggle="modal" href="/plus/login">Meats biker</a>  
118 <div class='divider'></div>  
119 <div class='column drop-down-item'>  
120 <a class="drop-down-button" data-redirect-to="/friends" data-toggle="modal" href="/plus/login">Tries a lot</a>  
121 <div class='divider'></div>  
122 <div class='column drop-down-item'>  
123 <div class='drop-down-right'></div>  
124 <span class='right-edge-drop-down'></span>  
125 <a class="drop-down-button right-button" data-redirect-to="/plus/login" data-toggle="modal" href="/plus/login">Tries a lot</a>
```







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# MATT DE LA PEÑA



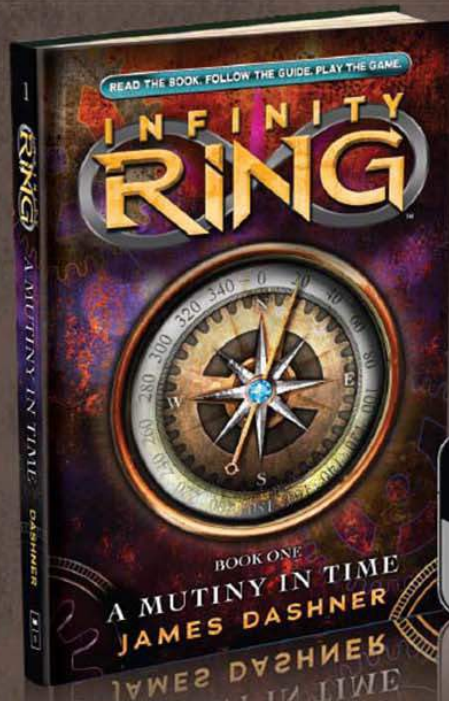
**Matt de la Peña** is the author of numerous books for teens, including *Ball Don't Lie*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, and *I Will Save You*, all of which were named ALA-YALSA Best Books for Young Adults. His most recent novel, *The Living*, was a Pura Belpré Honor Book. His first picture book, *A Nation's Hope*, made several Best of 2011 lists. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, where he teaches creative writing.



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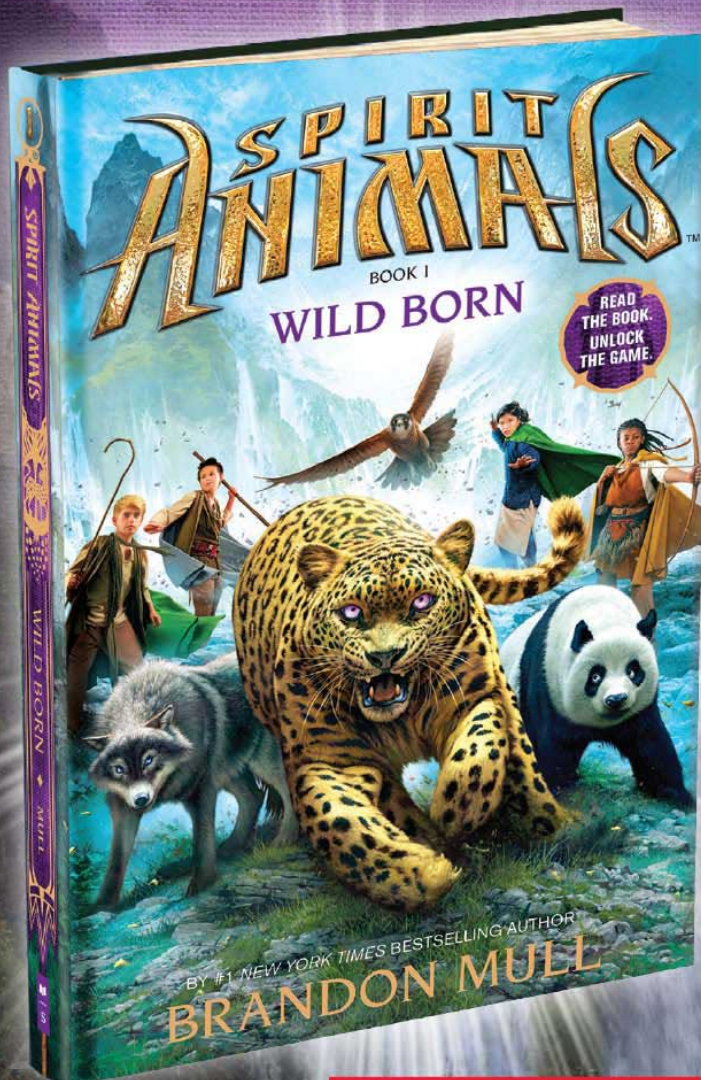
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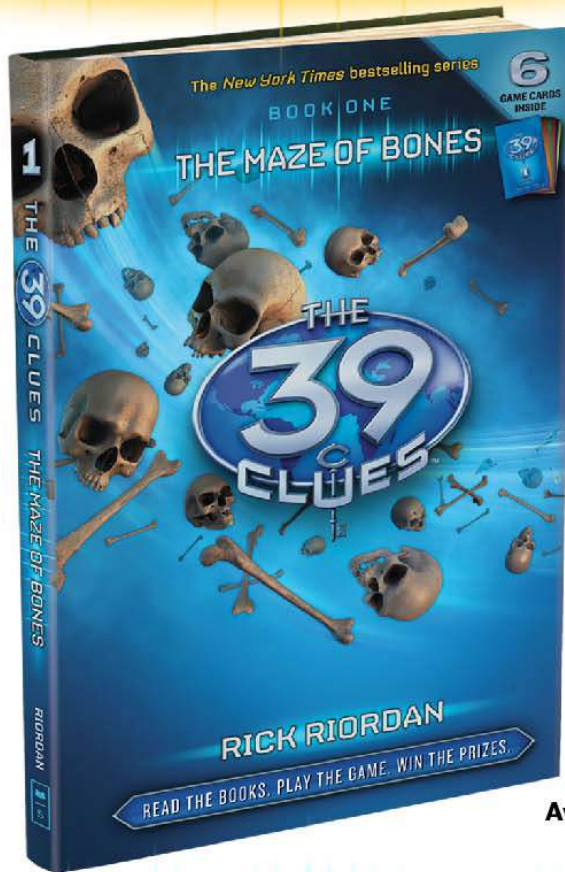
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e-ISBN 978-0-545-66771-5

Cover illustration by Michael Heath

Cover design by Keirsten Geise

Back cover photography of characters by Michael Frost © Scholastic Inc.

First edition, September 2014

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012

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# INFINITY RING

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## SECRETS



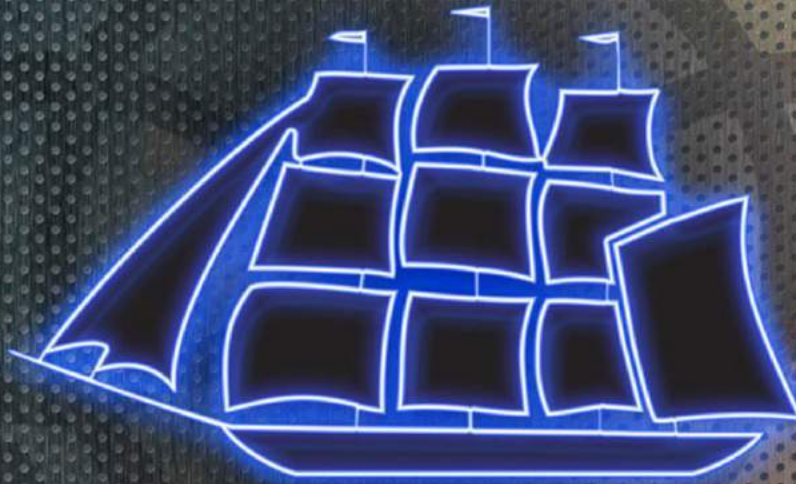
### SHIPWRECKED

E. W. CLARKE



# INFINITY RING

## SECRETS



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Hystorian File

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## WELCOME TO THE HYSTORIANS!

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**[**

**FIX THE PAST. SAVE THE FUTURE.**

## **Hystorian File #1503018077**

Only Hystorians know the real story of what happened aboard the *Santa María*: Thanks to time travelers Dak, Sera, and Riq, a mutiny against Christopher Columbus failed.

But what happened next?

Columbus went on to make landfall in the West Indies, a group of islands off the coast of what is now called North America. It was the beginning of an era of exploration and colonization that would change the world forever.

But it was not all smooth sailing for Christopher Columbus. After a triumphant return to Spain, his next two voyages would prove even more difficult than the first.

And on Columbus's fourth and final voyage to the New World, disaster struck.





THE SON of Christopher Columbus hated to travel.

Ferdinand knew that people seemed to find that funny. They laughed at the idea that Admiral Christopher Columbus could raise a son who would rather stay at home with a book than sail the seven seas.

But it wasn't funny to Ferdinand.

Christopher Columbus was his father. That much was true. But the admiral hadn't *raised* Ferdinand, not really. The boy had hardly seen his father in the decade since the man's fateful voyage of 1492.

That's why Ferdinand had decided to come along on his father's fourth voyage west.

It had proven the greatest mistake of his young life.



Climbing the riggings was easier now. On his first attempt, Ferdinand had nearly been thrown back to the deck of the ship. He'd clung tightly to the ropes, stuck halfway to the crow's nest and swaying dramatically as the ship sailed on, uncaring. It hadn't

occurred to him that the movement of the ship would feel more intense the higher he went.

It had taken practice, but he had grown used to climbing. Over many long months at sea, he had grown used to a lot of things. He had grown used to eating poorly, and to being exposed to the elements, endless wind and rain and sun. He had almost stopped noticing the stink of the unwashed crew. His hands had calloused over so that hard labor no longer left his palms pink and raw.

He was fourteen years old now. A man.

But he should have known better than to challenge the cabin boy in a race to the top.

Rio had won easily. He grinned down at Ferdinand from the crow's nest. "Ye climb with a donkey's skill," he called down.

"Come now," said Ferdinand. "I'm getting the hang of it."

"Yer grip has improved. But, then, our fair ship sails a calmer sea than most."

Ferdinand clambered into the crow's nest and looked out upon the sea. Then he looked down at the beach. The ship was wedged firmly in the sand — and had been for months.

"You speak the truth," he said, and sighed. "I missed the solid ground while at sea. Now I would give anything to be off this island." He pulled a spyglass from his belt and gazed out to the east, toward Hispaniola. Toward civilization. But he could see nothing but water.

Rio harrumphed. "Spoken like a true Columbus," he said. "Always chasin' somethin'. Never quite content with what ye have."

Ferdinand did not look away from the horizon even then. He continued to peer through the spyglass. "We're all going to die here, aren't we?" he asked.

Rio paused for a long moment. “Yes,” he said at last. “Seems likely t’me.”



They had run aground in June. It would have been the most frightening experience of Ferdinand’s life, if not for the tempest they had barely survived earlier in the year. That storm had clouded the skies for weeks. Weeks without sunlight, weeks in which it was impossible to get dry or even to know whether the other ships in their small fleet had sunk to the bottom of the ocean. After that experience, running aground on an isolated beach as the hold filled with seawater and the wood around them warped . . . well, it had hardly taken him by surprise. They’d had to take turns bailing out the water, and even working in shifts, their arms burned with the effort. They almost didn’t make it, and yet Ferdinand had been more exhausted than frightened.

Perhaps a sailor’s heart could callous in the same way as his hands. Perhaps Ferdinand was simply immune to terror now.

They had been stranded on Santiago for eight months. In all that time they had held out hope for rescue, but hope was wearing thin.

“I don’t even know what I’m looking for!” he called up from belowdecks. Although *belowdecks* didn’t mean much when most of the deck had rotted away over the last eight months.

Rio was still in the crow’s nest. He was looking through the spyglass, but not out at sea. Instead he faced south, looking out over the island of Santiago, 11,000 square kilometers of mountains and forests . . . and natives.

“Yer lookin’ for anythin’ the Taíno might want,” Rio responded. “Anythin’ we might trade for food.”

“There’s nothing left,” Ferdinand said, softly now, to himself. He leaned against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor. There was a hole in the plank near his ear, big enough to stick his thumb through. He peered through the hole at the beach beyond.

Shipworms. The termites of the sea. He hadn’t even known such a creature existed before they had begun eating away at his father’s ship.

“Uh-oh,” Rio said from high above, just barely loud enough to be heard over the surf. “Hey, Ferdinand! We’ve got some trouble.”

Ferdinand shot to his feet. “What? What is it?”

“Somethin’s happenin’ back at camp.”



Rio was the oddest boy Ferdinand had ever met. But that hardly came as a surprise. After all, Ferdinand had grown up at court, a royal page in service to the Spanish prince. Rio, on the other hand, was a commoner, the son of a sailor father and a butcher mother. He’d worked the docks of Palos de la Frontera from the moment he could stand, and he’d already forgotten more dirty jokes and curse words at the age of ten than Ferdinand would ever learn.

It wasn’t surprising that Ferdinand should find Rio so odd. What was surprising was how much he had come to like the younger boy.

Their friendship had begun their very first day at sea. It was a small boat, and as the admiral’s son, Ferdinand knew he would be under some scrutiny. He was determined to prove that he could contribute. He didn’t want anyone to think that he was spoiled or pampered or useless.

But he’d been laid low with sickness within an hour of leaving port.

It had been humiliating. It wasn't as if it were his first time on a ship. He'd visited Seville with his father and older half brother, Diego, only a couple of years before. But some combination of the tides, his nerves, and his mother's rich farewell feast the previous night had left Ferdinand completely defenseless when nausea struck.

It was then that Ferdinand first set eyes on Rio, a scrawny kid with an eye patch who walked with sure footing despite the relentless swaying of the ship. He stepped right up to where Ferdinand leaned over the side.

"Ye gotta keep yer eye on the horizon, landlubber," he said.

The ship pitched, and Ferdinand made a gurgling sound.

"I know, I know," said the younger boy. "Funny, a one-eyed boy tellin' ye what t'do with yer own set. But look here." He lifted his eye patch then, revealing the perfectly healthy eye beneath. "It's me pa's patch. I only wear it for luck. Me pa's a right silly tub of grease and snot, but he's a fine sailor. An' the best advice he ever gave was t'keep an eye on the horizon. Helps yer brain remember which way is up, no matter which way the sea tips ya."

"Thanks," Ferdinand said. He looked out at the line where the sea met the sky, and he took a deep breath of crisp, salty air. Maybe it was all in his head, but he felt a little better already. "My name is Ferdinand."

"Dakario," the other boy said. "But me mates call me Rio."



Ferdinand and Rio burst through the trees and into the Spanish campsite, but the adults didn't pay them any mind. All eyes were on the center of the clearing, where four men faced off, pointing fingers and shouting at one another.



Ferdinand's eyes fell on his father first. Christopher Columbus was angry, which was not an unusual sight. But he also looked tired. His posture was not as rigid as it had once been. His fine clothing was tattered and soiled. For the first time, it struck Ferdinand: Christopher Columbus was getting old.

Standing next to their father, Ferdinand's half brother, Diego, radiated menace. An imposing young man with broad shoulders and a permanent scowl, Diego seemed to have grown this past year as their father had shrunk.

Opposite the Columbus men were two Taíno men whom Ferdinand recognized.

One was the *cacique*, the local chieftain. He wore a cotton tunic over his shoulders and a headdress of bright parrot feathers. That meant he was here on official business. The anger on his face meant that the business was not good.

Next to him was the *bohique*, the tribe's wise man, healer, and teacher. Much of his skin was bare, revealing the tattooed glyphs upon his olive-colored arms, chest, and shoulders.

"You must leave here," the bohique said in flawless Spanish. The chieftain standing at his side nodded solemnly.

"You do not understand what —" began Ferdinand's father.

"You're not listening!" Diego cut in. "Do you think we want to be on this miserable rock? We're stuck!"

Ferdinand flinched at his brother's harsh words. The cacique didn't know Spanish, but there was no mistaking that tone. Diego's temper was a universal language all its own.

The Taíno men conferred for a moment, and then the wise man spoke once more. "We cannot continue to feed you. Perhaps if you

were to join us. Work our fields —”

“No,” said Diego. “No, the arrangement stands. You continue to bring us tribute, or there will be trouble for your people.”

The bohique stood firm. “We have grown used to your kind of trouble. Come to our village, and you will find us ready.”

With that, the Taíno turned and walked away.

“Why, those no-good . . . How dare they?” Diego fumed. “I’m sick of yucca anyway. Come on, men.” He turned to the ragtag collection of sailors who had watched the argument. “We’ll hunt.”

Ferdinand knew that was next to useless. While birds and fish were plentiful enough, Santiago had no real game to speak of. Aside from a small rodent called the coney and scores of bats, there weren’t any mammals on the island. How long could the castaways survive without the crops that the Taíno had been providing them with for months?

While the rest of the men gathered their meager collection of sharpened sticks, Ferdinand and Rio approached the admiral.

“What’s happened, Father?”

Christopher Columbus looked upon his youngest son with tired eyes. “The Indians have grown as weary of our presence as we are of theirs. They claim they can no longer continue to support us. But what options do we have?” He sighed. “Asia is indeed a strange and foreign land.”

Ferdinand could almost feel Rio rolling his eyes behind him. Word had begun to spread that another explorer, Amerigo Vespucci, claimed that the West Indies were not off the coast of Asia but instead were part of a previously unknown continent. Vespucci called it the

New World. The idea made sense to most people, but Columbus insisted that Vespucci was wrong.

Wherever they were, they would be doomed without the aid of the local people, who were skilled at agriculture and fishing. The castaways were accomplished sailors, but they had no idea how to live off the land.

“We’ve got to talk to them,” Ferdinand insisted. “We have to work something out.”

But his father was no longer listening.



Ferdinand and Rio had made the trip to the nearby Taíno village many times before. While the adults seemed content to stay clear of the locals except when begging or threatening them for food, Ferdinand was fascinated to witness such a foreign way of life. He and Rio had even made a friend: Tinima, the daughter of the bohique.

The men and women of the village went about their tasks, some nodding at Ferdinand and Rio as they passed. Either word of the argument hadn’t reached most of the people yet, or the growing animosity toward the Spaniards didn’t extend to the boys.

Still, Ferdinand noted the weapons on display throughout the village. There were fearsome spears made of sting ray spines. There were bows and arrows, some of which were treated with poison. There were macana, swords made of wood that were sharp enough to cut flesh.

Typically, the Taíno used these tools for hunting or working in their fields. But Ferdinand could imagine the weapons being put to another use if the castaways did anything foolish.

They found Tinima by the plaza in the center of the village. She was watching a game of *batey*, in which two teams knocked a rubber ball back and forth. The ball was large and heavy, and Ferdinand winced as one young athlete rammed it into the air with his head.

“Get me in there,” Rio said. “I’ll show ’em how it’s done.”

Tinima smiled. “It is a rough game. But there will be an archery competition later. Perhaps you would like to compete?”

Rio huffed. “Truth told, I’m not much of a shot.”

Ferdinand laughed. “Yes, he might actually *need* the eye patch after that.”

The boys sat beside Tinima upon a wooden bench and watched the game. Tinima had to explain much of it to Ferdinand, who still didn’t understand some of the finer points. In fact, he enjoyed watching the spectators as much as the athletes. He hoped to write about his experiences one day, and that meant he needed to develop a keen eye for all that happened around him.

As Ferdinand settled into the comfortable silence of a spectator, Rio told Tinima about the confrontation they had witnessed back at camp.

“It appears our fathers have little love for each other,” Tinima said to Ferdinand.

“It’s my brother I’m worried about,” he replied. “Diego can be difficult in the best of times. And these are not the best of times.”

“If only me own pa were here,” Rio said. “He’d straighten them all out. When me an’ me sis were little, we’d fight like cats an’ dogs. Pa’s solution was t’lock us outside one night, leavin’ us t’ fend for ourselves. Had t’ rely on our wits an’ on each other, huddlin’ together for warmth. An’ we never did fight again.” Rio thought for a moment.

“Ma an’ Pa sure had a row after that one, though. Ma was none too pleased with his ‘parentin’ skills,’ as she called it. Mebbe Sis an’ I should have locked *them* out then.”

“Anyway,” Ferdinand said, turning back to Tinima, “I don’t know how much longer this can go on. Your father and the chieftain are right. We can’t just expect your people to feed us forever. And I have a hard time imagining a crew of sailors and explorers planting a crop and settling down here. We *have* to get off this island.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Tinima.

“We need your people’s help one more time. We need to borrow a boat. What do you call them? The little boats made out of a tree trunk.”

“*Kanoa*,” said Tinima.

“Right. We need to borrow a canoe.”



The next morning, Ferdinand, Rio, and Tinima met on the beach. They’d each brought what provisions they could sneak away with. Rio was pleased to see that Tinima had brought several ears of corn.

“A marvelous food,” he said. “Ye can eat it in mere minutes, then spend hours findin’ morsels in yer teeth. A portable feast!”

Ferdinand ignored his enthusiastic endorsement, and simply thanked Tinima.

“I brought some berries I gathered,” he said. “I’m hoping you can tell us what’s safe to eat.”

Rio grabbed the satchel off of Ferdinand’s shoulders. “’Tis awfully heavy for a bag of berries,” he said, and began rummaging around. He pulled out a stack of books. “Are ye expectin’ t’get bored of our company, then?”

Ferdinand shrugged. “I don’t go anywhere without something to read.”

Rio held up a particularly thick book. He lifted his eye patch and squinted at the cover. “¡*Caramba!* I can’t even read the title of this one.”

“*Ephemerides*,” Ferdinand said, taking the book back. “It’s by Johann Müller, a German astronomer. My dad uses it to measure lunar distance and determine what longitude we’re at.”

Tinima blinked. “My Spanish is not as good as I’d thought.”

Rio patted her on the shoulder. “Yer Spanish is fine. Ferdinand is speakin’ some other language t’ confuse us.”

Ferdinand rolled his eyes. “Anyway, it’s the only book I haven’t already read three times.”

“Truly, we’re all sufferin’ here,” Rio said, and as if on cue his stomach growled.

Together they dragged a canoe through the sand. The canoes were marvels to Ferdinand, like a ship carved out of a single piece of wood instead of the thousands of planks and boards that had made up the vessels he’d been on. He had seen some canoes large enough to hold well over a hundred people.

Now, when he looked at the forest beyond the beach, it was like he could see rows of canoes hidden away inside the tree trunks, just waiting to be set free.

“Are you sure you can pilot this?” Ferdinand asked Rio.

“If it floats, I can pilot it. But if ye think we can take a canoe all the way to Spain . . .”

“Not to Spain. I only want to get as far as Hispaniola.”

“Hispaniola!” Rio exclaimed. “The land of yer father’s great adversary? The one place ’pon this Earth he is forbidden t’enter? Where the very name *Columbus* is synonymous with *monster, sinner, madman?*”

“That’s the place,” Ferdinand answered.

Rio smiled. “Sounds fun t’me.”

“Listen,” Ferdinand said, “I know we’re not exactly welcome there. But if I can speak to the governor, get him to see reason, then we could all be on a ship to Spain in a matter of weeks.” *Without any bloodshed*, he almost said. But he didn’t even want to acknowledge the possibility with Tinima there.

“I will go with you, of course,” she said then.

Ferdinand’s jaw dropped. “What, a girl on the open sea?”

Tinima bristled. “I do not know your customs, but in my tribe a woman is equal to such a task. And I have far more experience with rowing than either of you.”

“’Tis a fair point, landlubber,” Rio said to Ferdinand. “My pa once sailed with a girl Tinima’s age. She was disguised as a boy, mind ye, but he was impressed by her.”

Ferdinand blushed. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I just assumed . . . but it would be great to have your help, Tinima.”

“It will be necessary,” she said. “And you are forgiven . . . landlubber.”

Rio doubled over with laughter as Ferdinand’s blush deepened.

And then they set out to sea.



“We shoulda done this months ago,” Rio said, his spirits clearly buoyed by his return to the ocean.

“We did,” Ferdinand said.

“I mean us, personally,” Rio said. “Our mistake was sendin’ a man t’do a boy’s job.” He cut a glance at Tinima. “Er, ya know what I mean.”

“I do not,” said Tinima. “Has another of your people already made this voyage?”

“One of my father’s crew,” Ferdinand answered without breaking the rhythm of his rowing. “Mendez. He bought a canoe from your cacique months ago. But he never returned.”

“He’s likely enjoyin’ all the comforts of civilization,” Rio said. “Forgot all about us as soon as he found a bath and a soft bed.”

“Why would he do this?” asked Tinima.

“He’s joking,” Ferdinand said. “Probably. I’m afraid something terrible happened to him.”

They fell silent after that.



After another hour at sea, Ferdinand saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

Of course, the movement of the water had been constant. But it had also been monotonous.

This movement was sinuous, somehow. Snakelike. It stirred some primal dread within Ferdinand.

“What was that?” he asked.

“What?” asked the others.

“I saw something moving. Something big. In the water.”

“How big?” asked Rio. “Not the size of a person?”

“Maybe,” Ferdinand said, turning side to side, scanning the surface.



“Bless me,” Rio said. “Ye don’t think we’ve run afoul of sirens?”

“What are sirens?” asked Tinima.

“Women of the deep waters,” said Rio. “Mermaids.”

“My father has seen them,” Ferdinand said. “On his first voyage. Three women, lifting themselves from the ocean. He said they weren’t as beautiful as the legends claim.”

“They don’t need t’be beautiful,” Rio warned. “It’s their voices. If they speak t’ya, it’s already too late.”

“What do you mean?” Tinima asked.

“The legends say they can enchant a man. Make him turn over all his gold. Make him jump into the sea where he drowns.”

“But why?” asked Tinima. “Why would they be so cruel?”

“Ya ask all the wrong questions, d’ye realize that?” Rio said. “I don’t care *why* so long as they don’t do it t’me. An’ I knew we shoulda brought weapons, can I just sayz.”

There was a sudden splash from just behind them.

“¡*Madre!*” cried Ferdinand.

“Ancestors!” cried Tinima.

Rio cried out something less polite.

All three turned in time to see a slick gray tail submerge, sluicing through the water like a rapier on flesh.

“She’s seen us,” whispered Rio.

“What do we do?” hissed Ferdinand.

“Nothin’,” Rio answered. “Sit still.”

Ferdinand placed his oar across his lap and did his best to still himself. But his fingers shook, and his body seemed to vibrate with each tremendous beat of his heart. The water lapped rhythmically against the side of the boat, out of step with the staccato rhythm of his

heartbeat. Every little sound of water against wood filled him with anxiety. It all sounded like movement. If an attack came from the sea that is just what it would sound like.

He strained his eyes to see beyond the edge of the canoe. The sunlight glittered atop the black water, playing constant tricks, fueling his paranoia.

Then something struck the boat.

“¡Ay caramba!” said Rio. “Oh, save us!”

“It’s no siren,” said Tinima. “It is what the Mayan people call *xoc*.”

“Shark?” echoed Ferdinand. “What’s *shark*?”

“A monster of the deep. A fish, larger than a man, with many sharp teeth for biting and tearing.”

“So we can relax, then,” said Rio tensely. Ferdinand saw him pull a small idol from his pocket. It was a piece of Taíno craftsmanship. His thumb rubbed it worryingly.

“Do as you are doing,” she said. “Sit still. Keep your arms inside the kanoa. It is only curious. It will leave.”

“What if it doesn’t?” asked Ferdinand.

She didn’t answer.

A minute of tense silence passed, agonizingly slow. Then another minute passed, and another.

“I believe we are safe,” Tinima said.

“For now,” Ferdinand said. “What if that thing comes back? What if there are more of them?”

“It is a bad omen,” Tinima said.

“If a sailor knows anythin’, it’s a bad omen,” Rio said. “And the girl is right. There’s no shame in turnin’ back, Ferdinand.”

“But . . .” Ferdinand began. “How much farther to Hispaniola?”

“Farther than it is back t’ Santiago,” Rio answered.

Ferdinand looked down at his hands. He’d thought they’d gotten used to labor, but the hours of rowing had rubbed them raw all over again. New blisters were beginning to form.

And the sea. The sea held far greater terrors than shipworms. Without his father or brother there, he had little hope of overcoming whatever horror the sea would bring forth next.

He thought of Mendez.

“Let’s go back,” he said softly.



Rowing was dull work. There was little to distract Ferdinand from his swirling thoughts.

He couldn’t help but think that none of this would have happened if they hadn’t been turned away from Hispaniola to begin with. It had been one of the early stops on their voyage, more than a year ago. But the governor of the Spanish colony there had refused to allow them to dock. That’s when the storm had hit, the one the Taíno blamed on Juracán, their fearsome storm god. That’s when all the trouble had begun.

“Why do they hate my father so much?” he asked. “On Hispaniola. He discovered the whole island. Set up the colony. How could they be so ungrateful?”

Rio and Tinima shared a look.

“What?” Ferdinand asked.

Rio cleared his throat. “I don’t know how much ye’ve heard. . . .”

“What do you mean?”

“The admiral, he’s a fine admiral. Mebbe the most brilliant sailor I’ve known. But as me own pa would say, it’s oft the smartest man in the room who remains loneliest.”

“I know,” said Ferdinand. “I know he can be hard to deal with.”

“My people tell stories,” Tinima said. “The tribes across the sea, they knew great sorrow in recent years. Sorrow at the hands of a man who came to them as a friend, but grew cruel in his desire for wealth and power.”

“My father?” Ferdinand asked. “Your people suffered when he was governor of Hispaniola?”

“There was sufferin’ all around,” said Rio. “Some of it was on account of yer father. A fine sailor, but as a leader of men, a tyrant.”

Ferdinand bristled. “How would *you* know? You weren’t there.”

“True. But voices travel over the water, if ye catch my meanin’.”

“It is not easy,” Tinima offered. “To learn such things about our fathers and our heroes. But in the end, it is good.”

“Good?” Ferdinand scoffed. “What’s good about hearing that your father bullied other people?”

Tinima thought for a moment. “It means that our fathers are human. And that we can be more than they are. That, I think, is the important thing. We must learn from our elders’ mistakes. It allows us to step from beneath their shadows and to be better in the future.”

“Me, fer instance,” said Rio. “I’ve learned from me own pa not to belch in front of a lady.” He turned to Ferdinand. Then he let out the most tremendous burp Ferdinand had ever heard in his life.

“Technically, that was not in front of her, but behind her.”

Ferdinand couldn’t help it. He laughed.



Food grew scarce in the days that followed. Ferdinand and Rio joined Diego and the others in their attempts to hunt, but they had limited success. Spearing fish and birds with sharpened sticks and rotting nets was almost impossible. Their traps caught some coney, but the small animal provided little meat.

Christopher Columbus declared the Taíno village off-limits to the boys, and Ferdinand could hardly argue. The tension between locals and castaways was growing. If the fragile peace deteriorated further, Ferdinand didn't want to be anywhere near those wooden swords.

So when he wasn't out attempting to hunt, he spent his time on the beach, reading.

Or trying to. Rio didn't have much interest in books, and he didn't have much interest in being quiet either.

"I have a confession," he said one morning.

Ferdinand put down *Ephemerides*. "I suspect I know what you're about to say."

Rio seemed surprised. "Truly? And how would ya know me greatest secret?"

"I'm very observant, Rio. I pay attention to what happens around me. And I know that Tinima has been giving you gifts. Idols. Jewelry."

Rio nodded. "'Tis true. Ye've a keen eye. Two of them."

"You like her, don't you?"

Rio's one visible eye widened in surprise. Then he laughed. He laughed for a long time, long enough that Ferdinand squirmed with discomfort. Finally, he gathered his wits and spoke again.

"Ah, keen eyes and not a brain between them," he said. "No, I've only one love, and that is the deep blue sea. But I'm also . . . I'm a

collector, of sorts.”

“A collector?” said Ferdinand. “That’s your big secret?”

“Most people have two sides to ’em. Ye’re learnin’ that about yer father now. And yerself — ye be a landlubber through an’ through, yet ye’ve faired better’n most on our travels. And while I am a masterful sailor —”

“Well, cabin boy,” Ferdinand said.

“Sailor-in-training,” Rio said. “But I am another thing besides. A sailor like me father. An’ a Hystorian like me mother.”

“A historian?” echoed Ferdinand. “You mean you study history?”

“’Tis more than that,” Rio answered. “The Hystorians . . . We’re somethin’ of a secret club. An’ we have the grave responsibility of ensuring certain wicked people do not rise t’power.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” said Ferdinand.

“What’s important for ye to understand is that there is a secret war brewin’ between those who value freedom an’ such, an’ those who desire only power. An’ the Hystorians have had some success keepin’ our enemies out of the New World. And yet despite this, we were surprised to learn that crossin’ the great ocean has led t’many difficulties for the people who live here. In case the worst comes to pass . . . in case the Taíno continue t’suffer in this new age of exploration . . . I am charged with preservin’ what I can of their culture. Tinima knows this, an’ she has entrusted me with some of the artifacts her people hold dear.”

“Wow,” said Ferdinand. “I had no idea. Don’t take this the wrong way, Rio, but . . .”

“But ye underestimated me? I know it, ye rat pustule. But don’t beat yourself up. I’m flat talented at keepin’ a secret. For instance, I

haven't told anyone that ye yerself are sweet on Tinima."

Ferdinand looked down at his book. "I don't know what you mean."

Rio smiled. "Yer secret's safe with me, lad. I'm right glad we had this talk."



The castaways were growing hungrier by the day. As the food grew scarce, tempers ran hot.

Ferdinand woke at dawn to the sound of shouting. It was his half brother, Diego, cursing over a hunting net that had rotted away in his hands.

"I can't take any more of this!" he yelled into the sky.

The growing daylight cast everything in a ruddy glow. Diego's skin, darkened by months in the sun, glowed red.

"They dare deny us tribute," he growled. "Us! We who sail under the flag of the king and queen of Spain. We who spread their royal influence across the world, as is our divine right. They would have us starve on this filthy rock." He spat upon the ground. "I say it is they who should starve! They who should beg *us*! For we are the superior people, and they are but savages."

"They're not savages!" shouted Ferdinand.

The words had left his mouth before he'd even realized it. He was fuming, angry, and embarrassed all at once. The eyes of every man there turned toward him. Most were surprised, or curious. But Diego's eyes burned with rage. "What did you say?" he demanded.

Ferdinand stood his ground. He pulled back his shoulders and lifted his chin.

“They’re not savages,” he repeated. “They are clever, and they’re kind. They know which plants are safe to eat. They create artwork and play sports. Many among them have already learned our language. And they would work with us, if only we treated them as equals.”

Diego scoffed. “Equals?” he said. “Equals!” He shouted it this time, raising his arms and turning to the other men, as if he’d made a witty remark. As if he could win a debate simply by volume.

Some of the men laughed in response. But not all of them. *I haven’t lost them yet*, thought Ferdinand.

But then, suddenly, he was sprawled upon the ground, looking up at his half brother.

“We will take what we want,” he snarled. “And if we are to be trapped here, then we will be kings of this island.”

Suddenly, a shot rang out.

And Rio stood in the center of the clearing, holding a smoking pistol above his head.

“Let’s all calm down now, ye boot-lickin’ scum suckers,” he said. “Before I show ye just how savage things can get.”

“Rio?” Ferdinand said.

“Listen here, pipsqueak . . .” Diego began.

“He’s right,” said another voice. And Christopher Columbus stepped from the bystanders to stand beside Rio. “He’s right, Diego. You go too far. You would wage war against an entire island?”

“If I’d known we had working guns,” Diego said, “I would have suggested it sooner.”

“Enough,” said the admiral. “There is a fine line between bravery and foolishness. It is a line I have crossed before, but that time is past.



We must find better solutions lest we all die here this day.”

“Better to die than live like this, you old fool!” Diego countered.

“No,” said Columbus. “When you have children of your own, you will understand the folly in that statement.” He turned to the crew, singling out three of the largest men. “Detain Diego. Keep an eye on him until he’s cooled off.”

The men stepped forward to encircle Diego. They looked ready for a fight, but the fight had gone out of him. He knew that the crew’s loyalty was not his to command, and he went along quietly.

Columbus took the pistol from Rio, who made no apologies, then the man stepped over to Ferdinand, still sprawled in the dirt. He held a hand out, and Ferdinand took it, getting to his feet.

“Diego is right about one thing: I am an old fool. I made a terrible mistake bringing you here,” the old admiral said.

Hot tears sprung to Ferdinand’s eyes. He fought them back, but he knew his father saw them there.

“You misunderstand, my son,” Columbus said. “You have handled yourself marvelously. You have proven yourself a skilled sailor, and your keen eye and curiosity make you a better explorer than I have ever been.” He smiled sadly. “I only mean that I regret putting you in harm’s way. If I am meant to pay now for the sins of my past, I would not have you and Diego pay, too. Why must children suffer for the sins of the father?”

Ferdinand didn’t know how to answer that. “It’s not over yet,” he said. “There’s still hope.”

Columbus shook his head. “There won’t be war with the Indians today, but I know your half brother. His anger can no more be calmed

than the sun could fail to rise or the moon be wiped away from the sky.”

“What? What do you mean?” asked Ferdinand.

“I only mean to say that Diego is stubborn.”

But something his father had said was sparking an idea. It was more like the idea of an idea at first. An itch in his brain as some notion fought to take shape.

And then he had it.

“I think I know what to do,” he said. He took a deep breath. “But I need until tonight. Can you make sure Diego doesn’t do anything rash in the meantime?”

Columbus gave him a puzzled look. “I still have some authority here. I can detain him that long.”

“And can you invite the elders here? Tonight. Tell them we want to make peace. Tell them there’s something we have to show them.”

“I can try. What do you have in mind?”

But Ferdinand was already rushing away, back toward the beach. He called over his shoulder as he went. “It’s something I read once. I need to check my books.”



“I don’t get it,” said Rio. “An’ it’s not that I don’t have an abidin’ love for books, mind. I can read right well for a sailor.”

“Since when do cabin boys read?” Ferdinand teased. He was rummaging through his pack, tossing books aside as he searched.

“*Sailors* don’t need t’read. *Hystorians* do.”

“Well, let me know when you’re recruiting. Aha!” Ferdinand held up a book. *Ephemerides*.

He sat down and began flipping through its pages as Rio looked over his shoulder.

“It’s the particular book I’m wonderin’ about,” Rio continued. “What’s German astronomy got t’do with anythin’?”

“Astronomy is astronomy. We may be far from home, but we’re beneath the same sky.” Ferdinand looked up at his friend, deathly serious now. “And I think we can use that to our advantage.”



The sun was setting when the cacique and bohique came to the Spaniards’ camp, accompanied this time by an entourage of men. Warriors, Ferdinand realized. They held their bone spears like harmless walking sticks, but the threat was clear. If this went badly, things could get very ugly very fast.

Ferdinand had done everything he could. It was up to his father now.

Columbus stood before those assembled. He began by thanking the Taíno for coming. He spoke slowly, pausing regularly to allow the bohique to translate for his chieftain.

After the formalities, Columbus gave Ferdinand a tentative glance. The boy nodded, smiling widely at his father, and Columbus drew back his shoulders and projected his voice.

“Our time here has not been easy. It has not been easy on us, and it has not been easy on you. We are strangers to this land, and we are without resources. But we are not wholly without power.”

Columbus raised his hands in a dramatic gesture. “I have great magic that I have chosen to keep secret. But the time for secrets is over. As a demonstration of my power, I will blot out the moon tonight. It will no longer look down upon this island. And I shall not

return the moon to its proper place until our peoples come to an understanding.”

As the bohique translated, many of the Taíno laughed. The cacique, however, was not laughing. He barked a series of short, clipped sentences at the bohique, who turned to once again face Columbus.

“We do not believe you. We think that if you had the great power you claim to have, you would use it to leave this place. Yet clearly you cannot.”

Columbus stood firm. He didn’t even blink.

“We will keep our eyes on the sky tonight,” continued the bohique. “And when your folly is revealed, we shall be less inclined than ever before to help you.”

With that, they turned and left. As soon as they were beyond the tree line, Columbus seemed to deflate, letting loose a huge breath.

Ferdinand didn’t go to his father. The die was cast. He caught Rio’s eye and motioned for the boy to follow. They snuck off to the beach.



“Leave it t’the admiral to ham it up,” Rio said.

They were sitting on a flat rock overlooking the ocean. Tinima had joined them, bringing cassava bread with her. Ferdinand had thought he would be too anxious to eat, but the bread was fresh and delicious.

“Was it really so dramatic?” asked Tinima.

Ferdinand sighed. “Yes. I didn’t intend for him to pretend he’s a dark sorcerer. But you can tell he misses being in control.”

Rio shrugged. “He can claim to be a sorcerer or the king of England; it matters not to me. So long as that moon disappears.”

But in fact, it was already happening. From their vantage, they had a perfect view as a shadow crept slowly across the surface of the full moon.

“Explain this to me again,” said Tinima.

“It looks like the moon is disappearing,” Ferdinand said. “But it’s actually being covered by the shadow of the Earth. It’s only temporary. What’s amazing is that you can know in advance when it will happen. It’s like clockwork. Celestial clockwork.”

“And your father only claims that it is magic. That it is his doing.”

“Well, I guess he figured your people are a bit superstitious. . . .”

“Uh-oh,” said Rio.

“I mean,” started Ferdinand, “you know, all that talk about gods sending storms and bats being the spirits of the dead and . . . I’m just saying that sometimes your people see magic and monsters when there’s a rational explanation instead.”

Tinima smiled. “Then it is a good thing your people came to warn us of the mermaids.”

Ferdinand blushed. “That’s different.”

“How is it different?” Tinima asked.

“Because mermaids are *real*.”



The lunar eclipse happened, just as Müller’s book had claimed it would. The shadow of the Earth moved across the moon until nothing remained of it but a faint disk of red.

The Taíno people were duly impressed. They had already returned to the campsite by the time Ferdinand and his friends did.

The bohique approached them, speaking tenderly to Tinima for a moment before turning to Ferdinand and Rio.

“Your leader has done as he claimed. And now he has promised that the moon shall return to its natural state.”

“It will,” said Ferdinand. “But the truth is that it would return whether he said so or not.”

The bohique nodded. “Whether through his will or simple augury, he has shown us that your people are not so powerless as we had assumed.”

“We’re not powerless, exactly,” Ferdinand said. “But we are in desperate need of your help. We’ll die here without it.” He took a deep breath. “Our mistake was in thinking we had nothing to offer in return for your help. But we do know things. We’ve seen a lot in our travels, and our books are full of knowledge that might be of use to you. Or at least of interest to you. The knowledge we lack is how to live off this land.”

“A new form of barter,” the bohique said, smiling. “One I approve of.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. I’ve already learned one important lesson from your people.” Ferdinand’s eyes fell on Tinima even as he spoke to her father. “We don’t have to make the same mistakes as our parents. We can move past them. We can be better.”

“Tinima has already surpassed me,” the bohique said, putting his hand upon his daughter’s shoulder. “She saw an opportunity for friendship where I saw only rivalry. Things *will* be better now.”

Tinima smiled, and Ferdinand smiled back.



Four months later, Ferdinand was wading in the ocean. He was spearing fish alongside Tinima and Rio when a ship came into view.

“Could it be . . . ?” he asked.

They all hopped up and down on the shore, waving their arms above their heads and shouting like mad. The ship grew steadily closer, until they could see a man waving back.

It was Mendez, the sailor who had gone for help more than a year before.

“We’re saved!” cried Ferdinand.

And they were.



*Just over four months after their rescue from Santiago, Christopher Columbus and what remained of his crew were welcomed back to Spain. The admiral would never sail again, and he died never realizing his true impact on history.*

*Diego Columbus would go on to become Governor of the Indies. Unfortunately, Diego did not learn from the sins of his father, and the Taíno continued to suffer greatly under his rule.*

*After one more voyage to the New World, Ferdinand decided to live out his adult life in Spain. He wrote a biography of his father, and he established a library – one that was visited by scholars from throughout Europe. In the end, Ferdinand was much happier as a librarian than a sailor.*

— Arin

**The author gratefully acknowledges Zack Clark.**





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e-ISBN 978-0-545-52262-5

First edition, December 2013

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